POST MODERN

Sports Illustrated

FEBRUARY 2023
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BY CHRIS BALLARD

POST PLAY IS A LOST ART. COULD IT STILL BE PART OF THE NBA'S FUTURE?

***Nikola Jokić** and A Small Band of Believers Are Keeping The Dream Alive*

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FAN OF THE YEAR

PRESENTED BY

Captain Morgan

The NFL #FanOfTheYear contest celebrates extraordinary fandom and commitment to community through the game of football. The NFL is proud to announce the 32 #FanOfTheYear nominees whose love for football goes beyond the game. These fans rally others to spice up the game through their originality and fandom and serve as positive and inspirational influences within their communities.

MEET THE 32 TEAM NOMINEES & VOTE FOR THE ULTIMATE NFL FAN OF THE YEAR

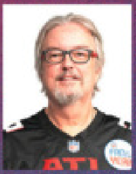
SUSAN HALUZAN

Arizona Cardinals

"This fan base is unique because the region is home to many visitors & retirees who often choose the Cardinals rather than being born into it."

HAROLD T DUNN

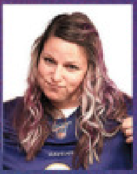
Atlanta Falcons



"I'm all in. Half of my year is planned around football season. I never miss a game and regardless of how it's going, we do NOT leave early."

KATIE OVERLY

Baltimore Ravens



"Game Day is our time after the stressful work week to enjoy the thrill of the NFL and support the hard work of all players and coaches."

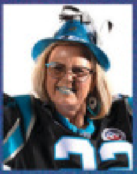
JOHN LANG

Buffalo Bills

"My tailgate vibe consists of food, music, and going to the bar by 7:30 am – gotta get ready!"

SHEREE PINTEA

Carolina Panthers



"I am always on my feet cheering on my team and trying to keep my section hyped up! I never leave my seat during the game to support the team."

COREY SCHIELER

Chicago Bears

"As a fan, I care deeply for my community and strive to give back through my volunteer work."

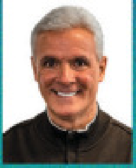
PHIL AMREIN

Cincinnati Bengals

"Our home games are known for great tailgating, ours is one of the largest. We also seek out visiting fans to give them a place to pregame."

TIM ZIFZAL

Cleveland Browns



"This honor is so very appreciated. But I want this iconic Browns franchise to get the most attention, not me. That's how much I love them."

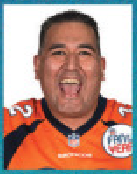
JAMES WRIGHT

Dallas Cowboys

"I believe we should not judge people on how much or how little they know about their team, but how much LOVE they have for the team."

JUAN OLIVARES

Denver Broncos



"Being a fan is unique to everyone. If something makes Broncos fans unique, it's the great roots and authenticity that we have with the team."

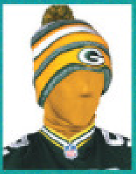
DENISE FORD

Detroit Lions

"What makes a tailgate great are good fans, good food, and a winning attitude. The excitement leading up to the game is unlike anything else."

ANNA LINBERG

Green Bay Packers



"Packers fans have huge hearts and really show up to games. We may have the smallest media market in the NFL, but we have the biggest fans!"

CARLOS RODRIGUEZ

Houston Texans

"I am like a cayenne pepper: I bring the heat to each game. I will cheer on my Texans, even when we are losing. Texan for life!"

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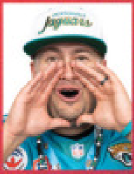
MICHAEL W HUPPERT
Indianapolis Colts

"At games, I rise and entice our entire section to make some noise. Together we stand and it creates a domino effect throughout the stadium!"

TYLER DERBY
Jacksonville Jaguars



"I always encourage good sportsmanship! We may root for different teams, but, we are all football fans and share that passion!"

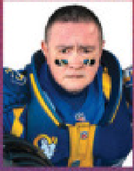
DR. AMY PATEL
Kansas City Chiefs

"Being able to be with Chiefs Kingdom, whether it's my fellow co-workers or patients truly means the world. We all love the Kingdom."

ENRIQUE C GARCIA
Los Angeles Chargers

"We have grown so much as an entire fanbase and we have been able to create such an inviting environment to all fans, no matter the team."

GUS OBREGON
Los Angeles Rams

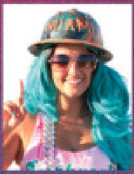


"Being a Rams fan means so much to me. This team gave me so much to my childhood and I am proud to be a big part of it today."

ELISEO ZEPEDA
Las Vegas Raiders

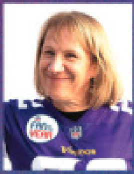
"On game day, my Raider Booster Club has a chant we say 5 times to get us ready. We chant "Rai-ders," and "We are Raiders for LIFE!"

ALLISON GOODMAN
Miami Dolphins



"I love being the super busy fan that I am. I thrive on seeing people have a good time. It fulfills me to bring new fans into the fold."

SHIRLEY BOWDEN
Minnesota Vikings

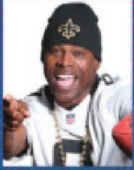


"There is nothing quite like the SKOL Family. It is Minnesota nice, and we welcome all, even our opponents."

RICHARD GOODICK
New England Patriots

"I have plenty memorabilia but my favorites are signed photos of the iconic moments in each of the Super Bowls I have attended."

STEPHEN HARRELL
New Orleans Saints



"The more game day swag you bring to the game that supports the team, the organization, and the fan base – the better!"

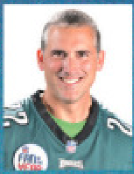
JEFF BLOOM
New York Giants

"I want everyone to feel a part of our tailgates and to bond over our common love for football and the Giants. We're there to have fun and live life."

MICHAEL W TORTO
New York Jets

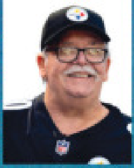
"Being a true fan means that your love for the team and the sport goes beyond the game. It's important to stay positive and laugh a little."

MATTHEW AUERBACH
Philadelphia Eagles



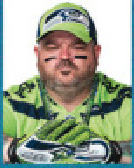
"What I love about Eagles fans is that there is an immediate and strong bond and brotherhood – anytime you see a fellow Eagles fan anywhere."

JAMES E ZIMMERMAN
Pittsburgh Steelers



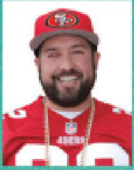
"It's great to feel the energy in the crowd on gameday. The excitement in the air that builds before and during a game is like no other."

LARRY BEVANS
Seattle Seahawks



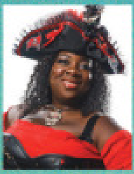
"It is important to bring the energy and enthusiasm all year round. I am a die-hard Seahawks fan, loyal 12, compassionate on and off the field."

REYMUNDO PENA
San Francisco 49ers



"After losing my eye ten years ago, I had my 49er eye custom-made! When other 49er fans see it and get hyped up, it brings me joy in life."

PRISCILLA WILLIAMS
Tampa Bay Buccaneers



"I'm happy my passion and dedication for the Buccaneers is seen. I will always cheer for and support my team through the good and bad times."

JOHNATHAN CABLE
Tennessee Titans

"I have dedication and positivity to the team and my fellow fans. It means a lot to represent the team I love and care for so much."

CHRISTOPHER BRYANT
Washington Commanders

"I love sightseeing in new cities, engaging with Commanders Fans, and opposing team fans as well. And win or lose, I am going to have fun."

SCAN TO VOTE

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Sports Illustrated OVERTIME

Sportsperson of the Year winner **STEPHEN CURRY** delivered an inspiring acceptance speech.

IN AN UNFORGETTABLE EVENING AT The Regency Ballroom in San Francisco on Dec. 8, *Sports Illustrated* celebrated its 2022 Sportsperson of the Year Awards presented by **Chase** alongside several honorees whose impact and achievements have transcended the world of sports.

Warriors coach Steve Kerr and teammates Klay Thompson and Draymond Green were on hand to present four-time NBA champion and 2022 NBA Finals MVP **Stephen Curry** with the title award, recognizing the All-Star guard for not only his outstanding athletic dominance but also his incredible philanthropic work with the Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation, helping to improve the lives of kids and families in the Bay Area and across the country.

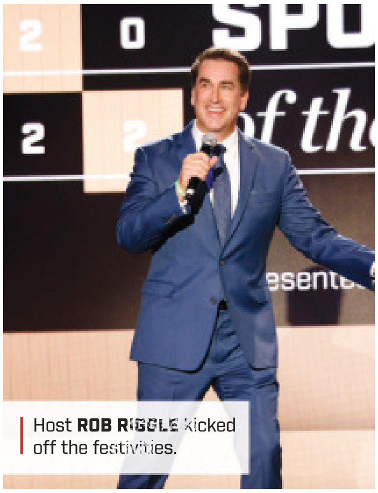
The 2022 SI Muhammad Ali Legacy Award recognized track and field icon **Allyson Felix**, an athlete who changed not only her sport but also the entire conversation around female athletes.

Our Male and Female Athletes of the Year recognized two record-breaking home run hitters, with Yankees All-Star and new American League single-season home run record holder **Aaron Judge** winning Male Athlete of the Year and two-time Women's College World Series champion and Division I career home run leader **Jocelyn Alo**, of the University of Oklahoma, winning Female Athlete of the Year.

The Inspiration of the Year was awarded to Commanders running back **Brian Robinson Jr.**, who triumphantly returned to the field after being shot twice in August.

And 10-year-old golfer and founder of Spectrum Golf **Carter Bonas** was presented with the *SI Kids* SportsKid of the Year Award by actor Joe Manganiello.

The 2022 *Sports Illustrated* Sportsperson of the Year Awards were presented by **Chase** with additional support from partners including **Under Armour, Gran Coramino Tequila**, **Reebok** and **Bottega**.



Host **ROB RIGGLE** kicked off the festivities.

SPORTSPERSON
OF THE YEAR

(L-R) Former WNBA star **ANGEL MCCOUGHTRY**, 2022 SI Female Athlete of the Year **JOCELYN ALO**, Commanders assistant coach **JENNIFER KING** and *Sports Illustrated* assistant managing editor **JAMIE LISANTI** participated in a panel discussion on the state of women's sports.

ALLYSON FELIX accepted the Muhammad Ali Legacy Award.

REEBOK
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RIGHTS
AWARD

2022 Reebok Human Rights Award honoree **DIETER CANTU**.

Guests enjoyed signature cocktails from the customized **GRAN CORAMINO** tequila bar.

A DECADE OF GOOD
CURRY
AN
UNDER ARMOUR
BRAND

KICKIN' IT: **UNDER ARMOUR**'s exhibit of Curry Brand sneakers throughout the All-Star's career.

LINEUP

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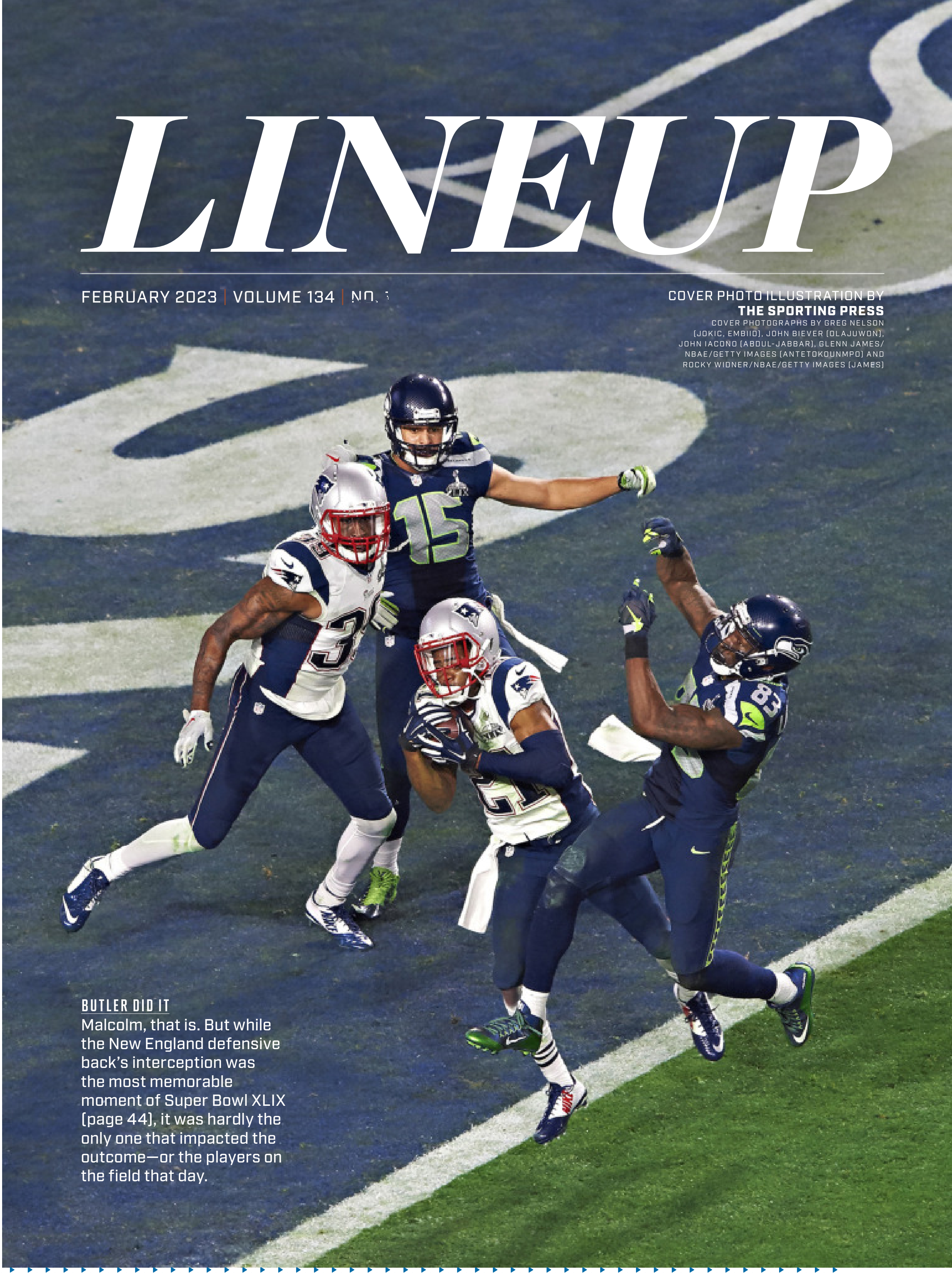
COVER PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREG NELSON (JOKIC, EMBIID), JOHN BIEVER (OLAJUWON), JOHN IACONO (ABDUL-JABBAR), GLENN JAMES/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (ANTETOKOUNMPO) AND ROCKY WIDNER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (JAMES)



BUTLER DID IT
Malcolm, that is. But while the New England defensive back's interception was the most memorable moment of Super Bowl XLIX (page 44), it was hardly the only one that impacted the outcome—or the players on the field that day.

JOHN IACONO

DEPARTMENTS ▸

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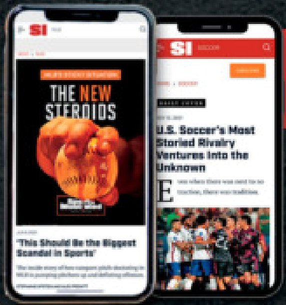

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LINEUP

CALE'S TALE
In just his fourth season, the blueliner has already led Colorado to a Stanley Cup and has drawn comparisons to legends.

ERICK W. RASCO

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POST PLAY

As big guys who dominate on the blocks become more rare, a few preach the forgotten craft—and seek its return

BY CHRIS BALLARD

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SUPER BOWL XLIX

The last time the NFL title was decided in Arizona, it came down to one iconic play. A few others were just as pivotal

BY GREG BISHOP

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HOWARD UNIVERSITY

Bison coach Nic Askew has made the nation's lone all-Black swim team competitive—and the hottest ticket around

BY ROBERT SANCHEZ

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CALE MAKAR

It's long been sacrilege to compare a defenseman to Bobby Orr. But then Colorado's do-everything dynamo came into the picture

BY MICHAEL FARBER

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SPORTS JOBS

You don't need a wicked slider or even a smooth J for a career in sports. It just takes work—and maybe a dad who loves polka

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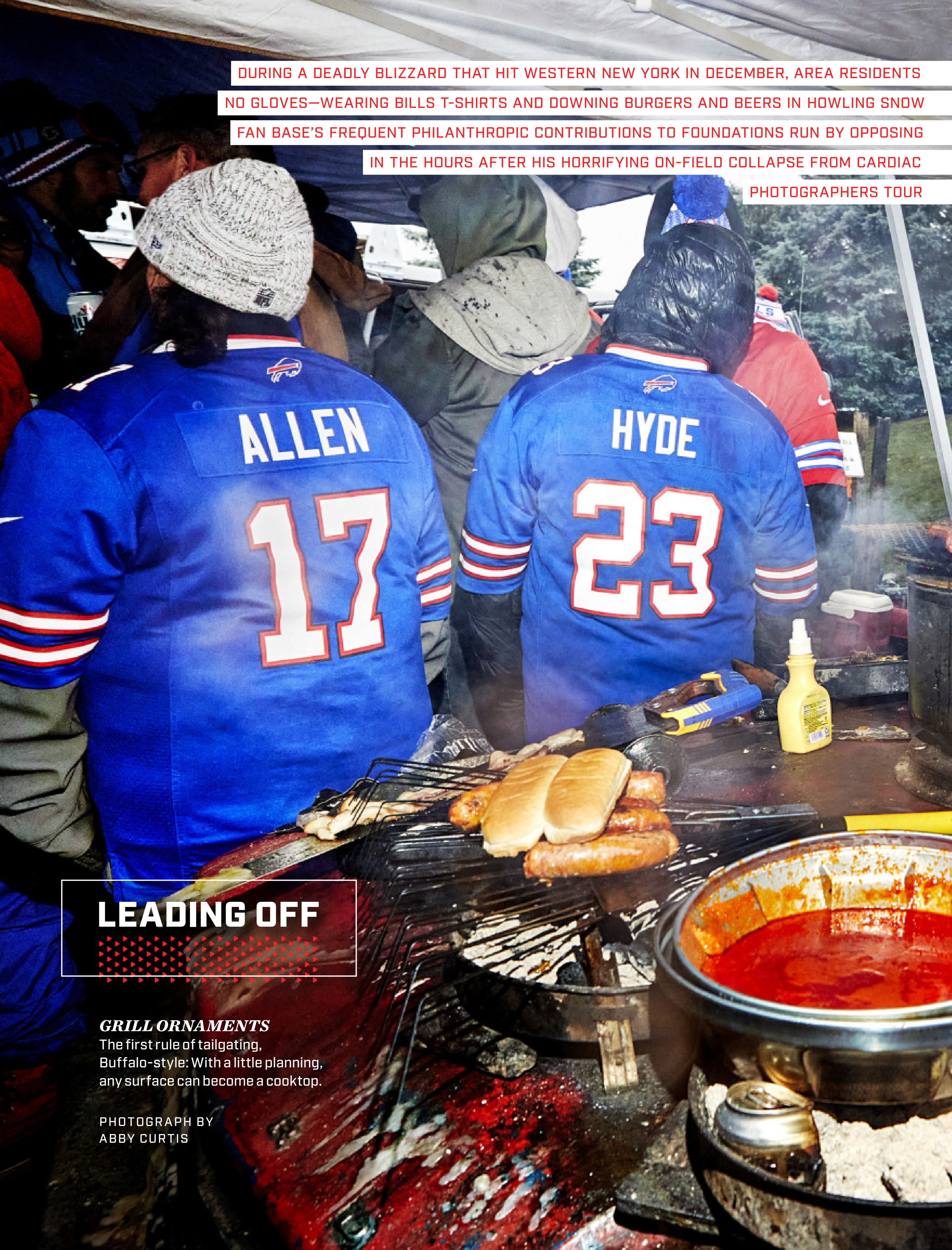
DURING A DEADLY BLIZZARD THAT HIT WESTERN NEW YORK IN DECEMBER, AREA RESIDENTS

NO GLOVES—WEARING BILLS T-SHIRTS AND DOWNING BURGERS AND BEERS IN HOWLING SNOW

FAN BASE'S FREQUENT PHILANTHROPIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO FOUNDATIONS RUN BY OPPOSING

IN THE HOURS AFTER HIS HORRIFYING ON-FIELD COLLAPSE FROM CARDIAC

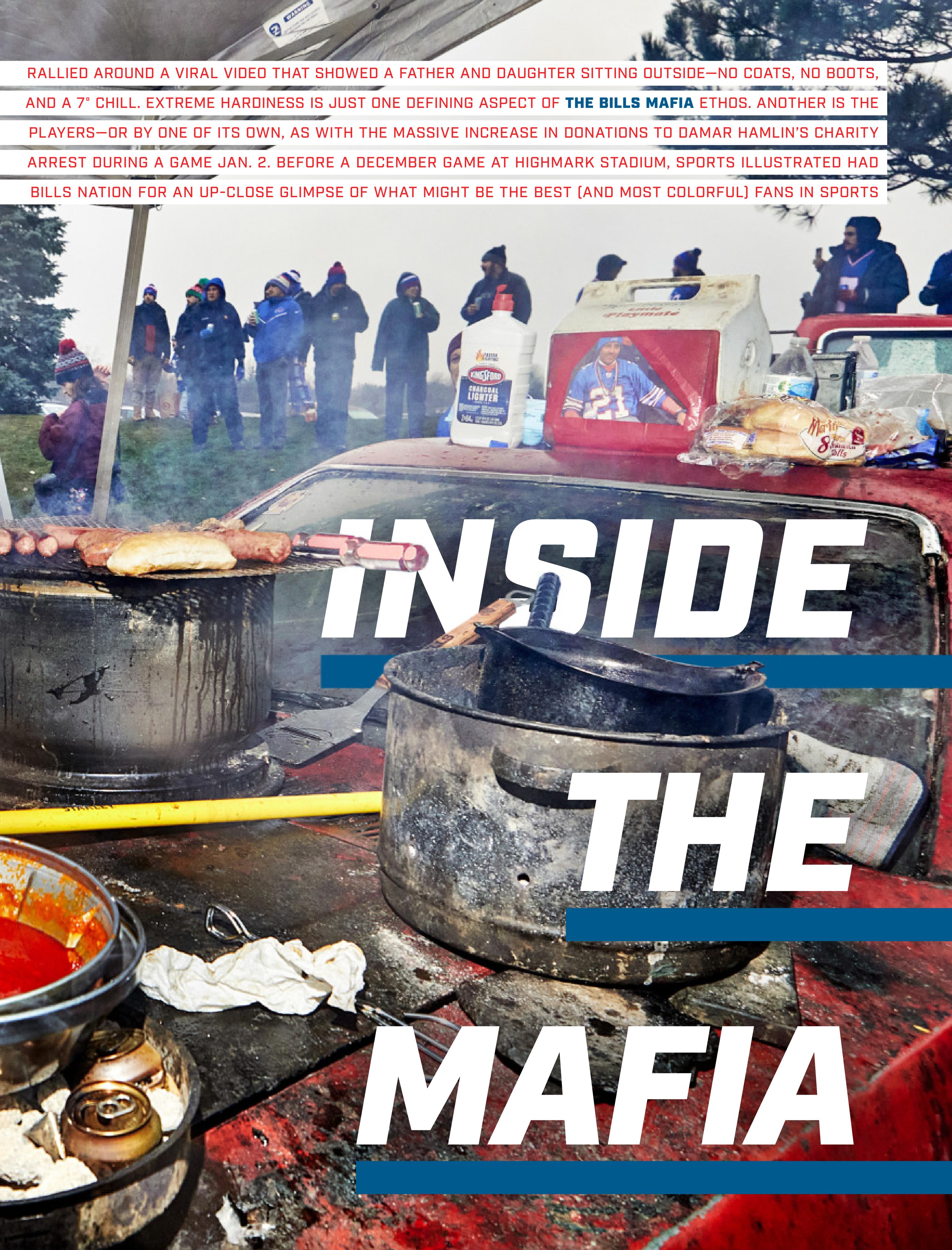
PHOTOGRAPHERS TOUR



LEADING OFF

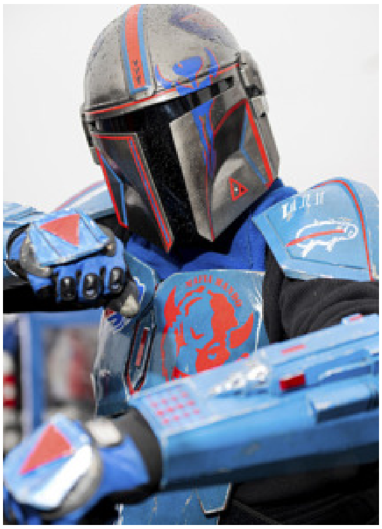
GRILL ORNAMENTS
The first rule of tailgating, Buffalo-style: With a little planning, any surface can become a cooktop.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ABBY CURTIS



RALLIED AROUND A VIRAL VIDEO THAT SHOWED A FATHER AND DAUGHTER SITTING OUTSIDE—NO COATS, NO BOOTS,
AND A 7° CHILL. EXTREME HARDINESS IS JUST ONE DEFINING ASPECT OF **THE BILLS MAFIA** ETHOS. ANOTHER IS THE
PLAYERS—OR BY ONE OF ITS OWN, AS WITH THE MASSIVE INCREASE IN DONATIONS TO DAMAR HAMLIN'S CHARITY
ARREST DURING A GAME JAN. 2. BEFORE A DECEMBER GAME AT HIGHMARK STADIUM, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED HAD
BILLS NATION FOR AN UP-CLOSE GLIMPSE OF WHAT MIGHT BE THE BEST (AND MOST COLORFUL) FANS IN SPORTS

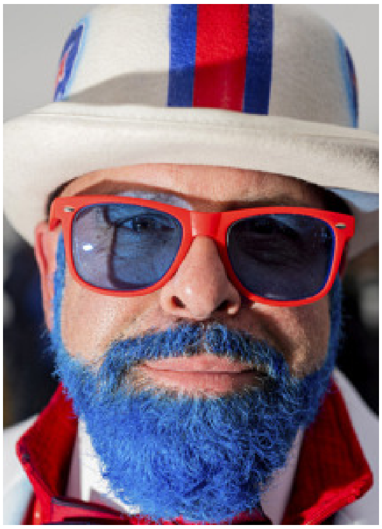
INSIDE THE MAFIA

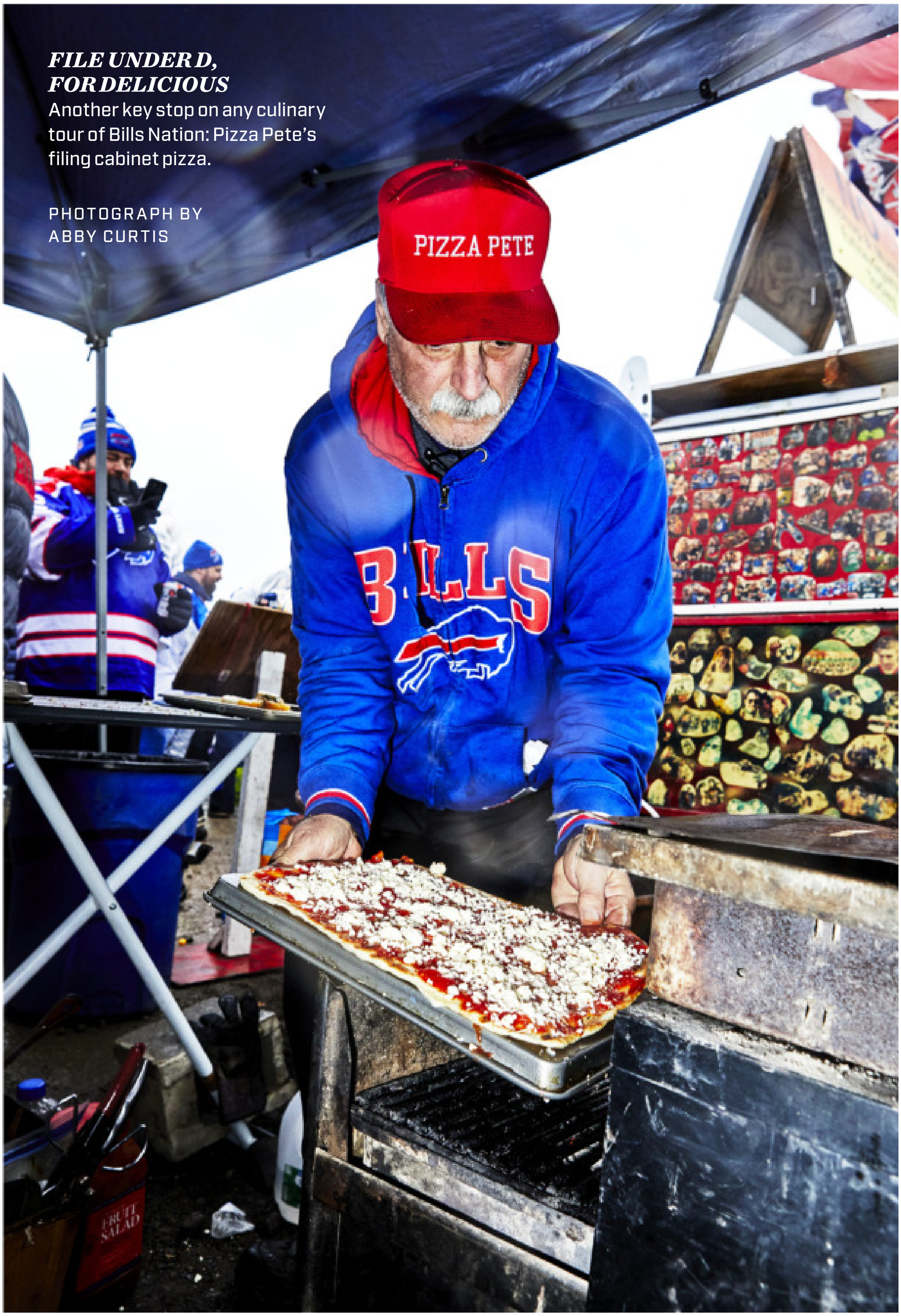


FACES OF THE NATION

Their game-day attire might inspire nightmares, but for fans in need Bills Mafia members can be a dream come true: A group led by Daniel McMahon, aka Shorty McBills (below center), has raised more than $120,000 for Buffalo-area charities since 2019.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ARIANA SHCHUKA (LEFT); VINCENT ALBAN (5) AND CLAY PATRICK MCBRIDE (3)




PIZZA PETE
BILLS
FRUIT SALAD

FILE UNDER D, FOR DELICIOUS

Another key stop on any culinary tour of Bills Nation: Pizza Pete's filing cabinet pizza.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
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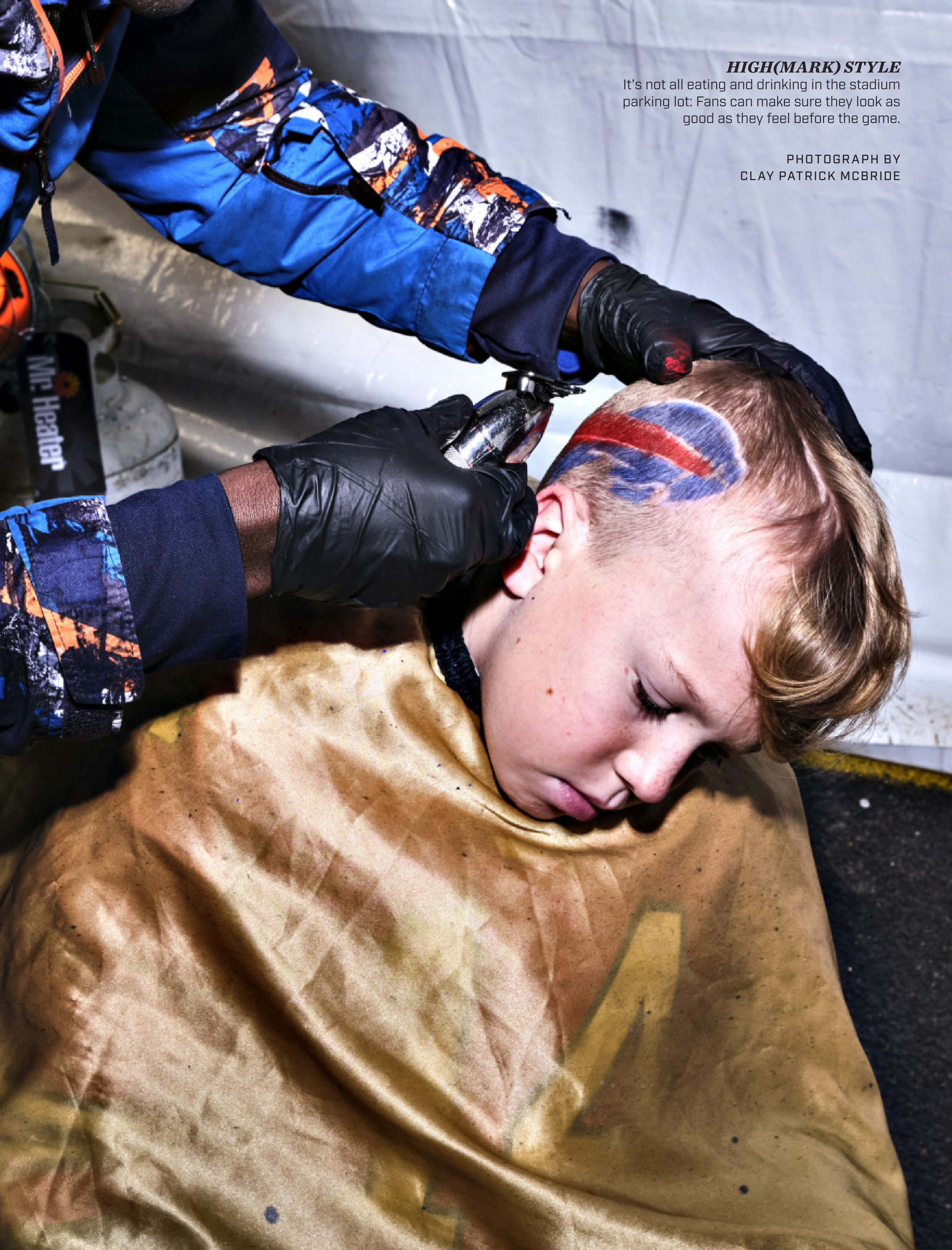

HIGH(MARK) STYLE
It's not all eating and drinking in the stadium parking lot: Fans can make sure they look as good as they feel before the game.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
CLAY PATRICK MCBRIDE

SCORECARD

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NCAA
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NEW DIRECTION

BY APPOINTING A POLITICIAN AS ITS NEXT PRESIDENT, THE NCAA IS MOVING AWAY FROM WHAT GOT IT INTO ITS CURRENT CONUNDRUM

BY PAT FORDE

FOR THE first time in 72 years of executive leadership, the NCAA has gone outside its own campuses or national office to find a president. Given the state of affairs in the college sports landscape, this seems like a fine time to shatter the status quo and try something different.

Starting March 1, outgoing Massachusetts governor Charlie Baker, a Republican, will be the new president of the NCAA. Hiring a sitting governor is a significant break from the established pattern of college administrators in that role, be they school athletic directors or university presidents or NCAA bureaucrats. It continues the industrywide trend of moving away from the kind of leaders who have steered it into the current quagmire.

Like predecessor Mark Emmert, Baker might turn out to be little more than the next well-paid piñata in the presidential role. Hopefully he presides over fewer disasters than Emmert, many of which were self-inflicted and diminished the credibility of the NCAA's national office.

For now, let's grant Baker, who chose not to run for a third term as governor, the benefit of the doubt and assume he will have some legitimate influence and stature. If so, four of the six most powerful people in college athletics will have arrived within the past three years from completely outside the space. Big Ten commissioner Kevin Warren came from the NFL. Pac-12 commissioner George Kliavkoff was in the Las Vegas entertainment industry. Big 12 commissioner Brett Yormark was a sports and entertainment exec with NASCAR, the Nets and Roc Nation. Now the NCAA is going straight politician.

The last career campus administrators in the group are Greg Sankey, the SEC commissioner, and ACC commish Jim Phillips. The pivot away from that profile, which had proliferated for decades, indicates how badly the previous generation screwed things up by being stubborn, greedy and myopic. It also indicates the shifting needs of the constituents. The conferences want dealmakers who can market them to media companies for the highest possible dollar figure. The NCAA wants someone who can convince politicians to produce legislation that keeps the association viable and out of its current barrage of lawsuits.

The NCAA has been begging for congressional intervention on a number of levels, most notably finding a path on player compensation that reins in the current unrestricted free agency, as well as a consistent name, image and likeness policy. The colleges don't want to make their athletes employees; they want uniform legislation that would provide some control over their earning power and movement among schools. But outside of a few senators and representatives who have been involved in crafting proposed legislation, most of D.C. has shown little interest in getting involved.

Is hiring a politician as the new NCAA president the best way to get a political bailout? Could be. Perhaps the best person to

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MEET THE NEW BOSS
Among the issues facing Baker (above, at Harvard last March) is NIL, which has made Bama's Bryce Young a millionaire.

ask is Tom McMillen, a former U.S. representative and college basketball player who now serves as the CEO of the LEAD1 Association, representing 131 athletic directors of FBS schools.

"Very good choice," McMillen says of Baker's hiring. "Inspired in many ways. . . . He brings a lot to the table. Governor is no small task. The most important thing is he brings this political acumen to the table.

"His constituency is now the 1,100 schools. He's got to build trust and bonds with those schools. He's got an interesting blend of qualities."

Amy Perko of the Knight Commission, a college athletics advisory group that also serves in a watchdog role, says wrangling control of high-level football is the most pressing issue. That tail has wagged the dog for many years, and it will only grow stronger as the Playoff expands to 12 teams with the 2024 season and the sport generates even more revenue. Football's ravenous appetite for more of everything—while also producing almost all the money that sustains other sports—is largely unchecked.

"It should be the first priority," Perko says. "To figure out the role of the NCAA and the responsibility of the NCAA with regard to the governance of FBS football. FBS governance is a mess. With the CFP expanding to generate $2 billion annually outside of the NCAA, the issue of governance of that sport can no longer be punted."

There are many more areas to address as Baker, 66, assumes what has been a thankless task. Trying to get more than 1,000 schools of wildly diverse investment in athletics to see any issue through

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ERICA DENHOFF/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (BAKER); GREG NELSON (YOUNG)

BECAUSE
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MAYBE TECHNOLOGY JUST NEEDS A

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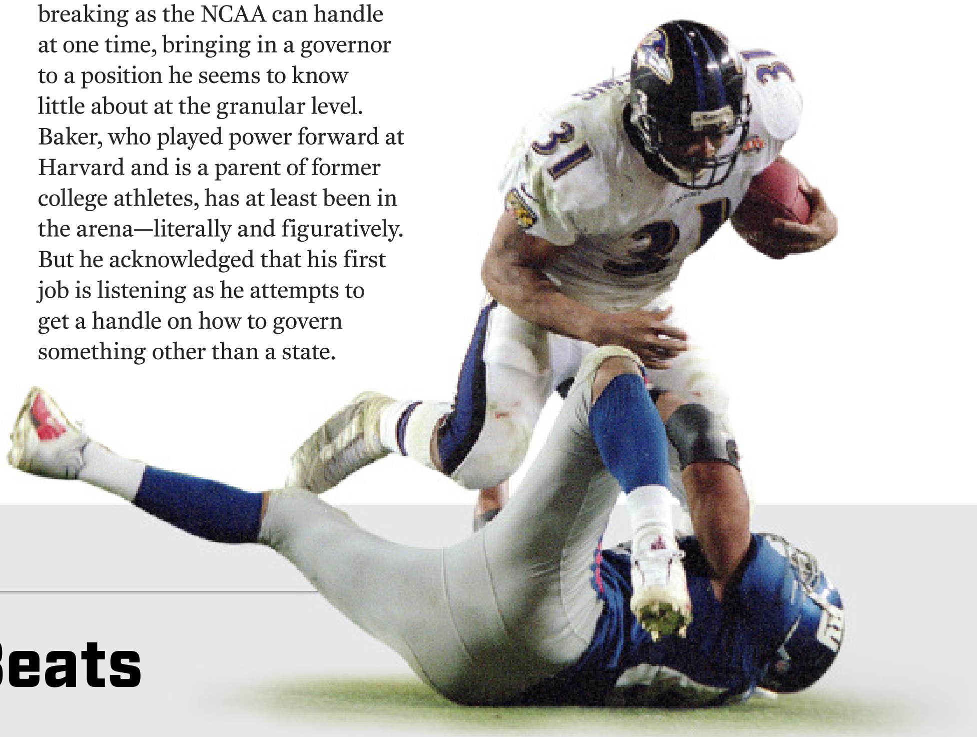
the same lens is difficult. Trying to enact substantive change has long been akin to turning a battleship in a bathtub. But as Baker himself noted in a vague introductory press Zoom call in December, this is "a bit of a pivotal period for the NCAA."

Hence a pivotal hire, away from former university presidents and ADs and bureaucrats. This search for the next president was informed by feedback from the NCAA's transformation committee, which has been tasked in the past year with remaking as much as it sees fit about the way college athletics is guided and administered.

One thing decidedly non-transformational about this part of the committee's work is the very complexion of its new leader. Baker is another white man in charge. Other than a couple of notable inclusions for brief periods in the 1980s (SWAC commissioner James Frank) and '90s (UC San Diego athletic director Judith Sweet), the face of NCAA leadership has been monochromatic and masculine.

Maybe this is as much mold-breaking as the NCAA can handle at one time, bringing in a governor to a position he seems to know little about at the granular level. Baker, who played power forward at Harvard and is a parent of former college athletes, has at least been in the arena—literally and figuratively. But he acknowledged that his first job is listening as he attempts to get a handle on how to govern something other than a state.

He's going to get an earful. From everyone. But college sports outsiders are the new insiders, for better or worse, and Charlie Baker has the advantage of following someone who set the bar for NCAA leadership about as low as possible.



DAMIAN STROHMEYER

SI SPORTSBOOK

Super Bad Beats

PERFORMANCES ARE magnified at the Super Bowl. If a player is a hero on that stage in sports, he'll be remembered forever. The same holds for gambling results: The game has yielded some of the most epic bad beats in history:

Super Bowl XXXV, under 33 A game featuring the league's two best defenses, the Giants and the Ravens, had what was tied for lowest over/under in Super Bowl history. The matchup was a sluggish affair. Baltimore led 10–0 with 19 minutes to play before three TDs in less than a minute—none by the offense. Jamal Lewis *(above)* and the Ravens tacked on 10 points in the fourth, and somehow a game that featured just 24 combined first downs ended 34–7.

Super Bowl LIV, Patrick Mahomes over rushing yards Depending on the book, the over/under for the K.C. QB's rushing yards was between 29.5 and 36.5. He was safely at 44 with 57 seconds left and his team up 31–20 against the 49ers. But instead of just taking a knee, Mahomes danced around to kill time. He lost five, three and seven yards, bringing his total down to 29.

Super Bowl LI, Atlanta +3.5 The Falcons jumped out to a 28–3 lead over the Patriots, and we all know what happened next. But even after Tom Brady had performed his magic to send the game to OT at 28–all, bettors who had Atlanta still had to feel O.K. Even a New England field goal in overtime would mean the Falcons would cover (or push if the bet was made at +3). But instead of kicking a chip shot to win, Pats coach Bill Belichick ran two plays from the Atlanta 2. James White punched it in for a TD, ripping out the hearts of Falcons fans—and bettors. *—Mark Bechtel*

For Super Bowl odds, visit ***SISportsbook.com***

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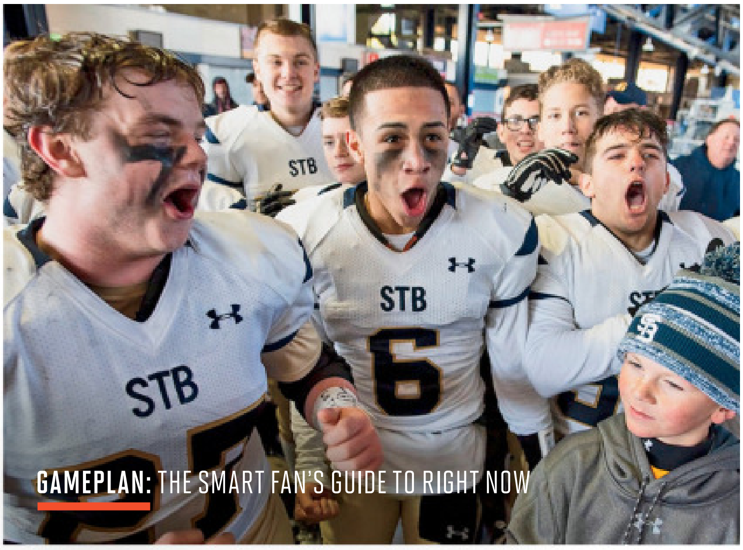

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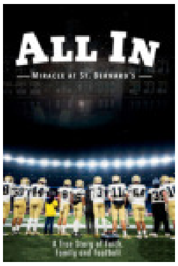
SHOW OF FAITH

HOW A STRUGGLING SCHOOL'S FOOTBALL TEAM LED THE FIGHT FOR ITS SURVIVAL



STREAM

ALL IN: MIRACLE AT ST. BERNARD'S (Now on VOD) In the first 10 minutes of the excellent, uplifting documentary *All In*, St. Bernard's, the smallest high school to play football in Massachusetts, wins the state title with 34 players.

But following the season, the Diocese of Worcester informs the school that it could be shuttered. Enrollment at the 100-year-old institution in Fitchburg, which had been around 500 at the turn of the century, was down to barely 100. Led by a new principal with no experience running a school, the St. Bernard's community members come up with a plan: Break away from the diocese and run the school themselves. To do that, they have to raise $1 million.

As the head of the fundraising committee points out, it's hard to get people to donate toward what's perceived as a failing entity. "We didn't have the story line," he says. Enter the football team. Under big-hearted coach Tom Bingham, the kids take it upon themselves to become the face of the effort, thinking if they win again it will drive donations. "We felt it was up to us to save this school," says one player.

It's gut-wrenching stuff. Parents are worried about kids, kids are worried about parents and no one wants to admit they're worried about anything. Early on, Bingham tells the kids, "Bad things happen—what are you gonna do?" The answer, over the course of the movie, becomes clear: Join together and do good things. —M.B.

COURTESY OF GRAVITAS VENTURES (2)

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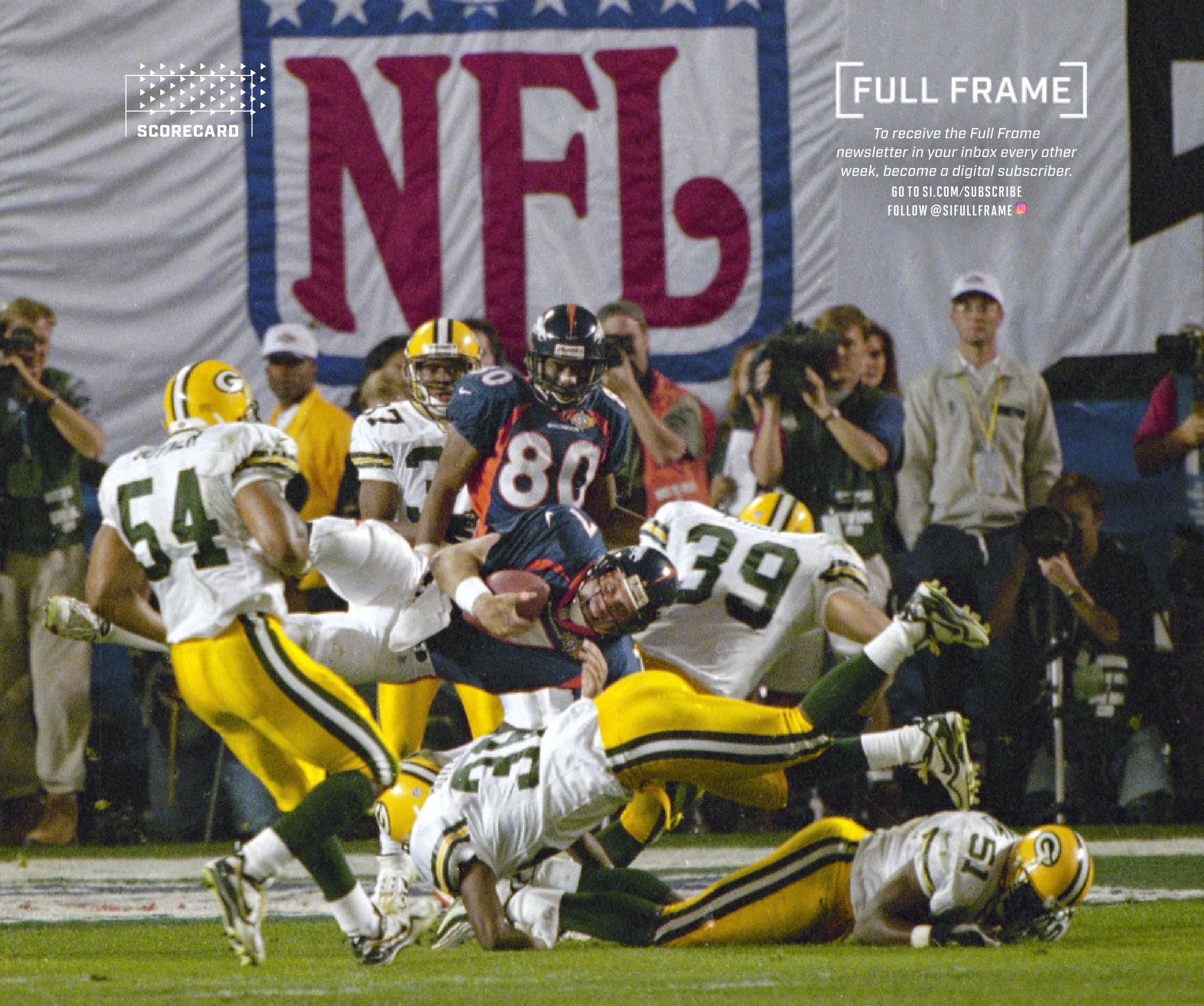

WHIRLED FAMOUS

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN W. McDONOUGH

SUPER BOWL XXXII was going to be special for John W. McDonough no matter what happened. It was in his hometown of San Diego, so he got to play host to the bevy of photographers SI sent. It became even more special when he captured one of the most iconic moments in NFL history: the Helicopter Play.

Late in the third quarter, with the score tied at 17, the Broncos faced third-and-6 at the Green Bay 12. Denver QB John Elway was hit by three Packers as he scrambled, sending him spinning parallel to ground. He got the first down, and the Broncos went on to score a TD and win the game 31–24.

McDonough was positioned in the stands at the opposite end of Qualcomm Stadium, where he watched the action through a 600mm lens. He knew that even though Elway was 37, he still could make things happen with his legs. “He’s always the playmaker,” says McDonough. “You stay on him because you just don’t know when he’s gonna make some kind of crazy move. After a play like that happens, you do the sign of the cross and hope that it’s sharp and framed properly.”

In the photo, Elway is looking right into the camera, grimacing at the hit. “I was shocked that he was able to get up,” says McDonough. “He was so pumped with adrenaline that he just didn’t notice it, but it had to have left a mark.” It definitely left an indelible image on the pages of the magazine. —M.B.

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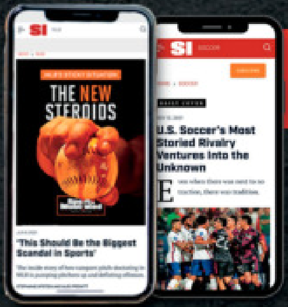
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EATS: FOOD. DRINK. CULTURE. SPORTS

EATING SMART

LANE JOHNSON, PHILLY'S 325-POUND RIGHT TACKLE, IS SHOWING YOU CAN THRIVE WHILE DINING ON CHICKEN FRIED STEAK

EAGLES TACKLE Lane Johnson is a meat and potatoes guy—literally. The 10-year veteran eats a version of the classic combo two or three times a week, according to his personal chef. "I try to take the foods he really likes and clean them up," says Justin Massie, 36, a California Culinary Academy graduate who, in 2021, hooked up with his friend Gabe Rangel—an athletic performance trainer—to cook meals that taste good and fit the nutritional needs of an NFL lineman.

During the season, Massie and Rangel make sure Johnson, 32, is eating around one gram of protein per pound of body weight a day—or roughly 300 grams (and 4,000 calories). "Ingredient-wise, there is no skimping on quality or price," Massie says. Free-range chicken, grass-fed meats, sea salt, noninflammatory oils and organic fruits and vegetables—everything is selected to make sure Johnson is getting maximal health benefits.

Chicken fried steak with mashed potatoes and gravy is one of Johnson's favorites, so Massie makes simple swaps for a healthier, higher-quality version than your standard, butter-laden diner fare. "Instead of all-purpose flour, I batter pounded-out sirloin steak in healthier flours, like rice, oat or quinoa, and pan-fry in avocado oil instead of deep-frying," he says. "For the gravy, I make a cashew-based sauce to up the protein."

Massie isn't planning on changing the menu anytime soon—through Week 15, Johnson has gone 27 games without allowing a sack—but he'll continue to stay away from the two ingredients his client won't eat: onions and bell peppers. Safe to say there won't be any Philly cheesesteaks in Johnson's future. *—Jamie Lisanti*

LANE COURSES

What a lineman eats in a day

▼ ▼ ▼

BREAKFAST

- 4 eggs, over medium
- 5 pieces thick-cut bacon
- 3 protein waffles

LUNCH

Fried chicken BLT sandwich

- 8 oz. chicken breast
- 4 oz. thick-cut bacon
- 2 slices whole wheat sourdough
- lettuce, tomato, spicy bacon aioli
- side of roasted potatoes

DINNER

- 16 oz. ribeye
- sweet and spicy sauce
- candied sweet potatoes

DESSERT

High-calorie protein shake

- protein powder
- frozen bananas
- plant-based milk
- Brazil nuts, walnuts or cashews

MITCHELL LEFF/GETTY IMAGES

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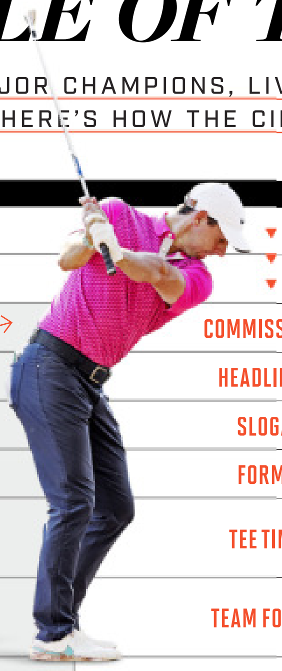
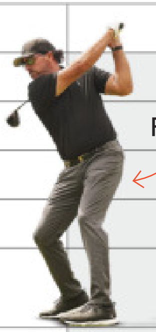
GOLF 2023
PREVIEW

TALE OF THE TAPE

WITH BIG-NAME MAJOR CHAMPIONS, LIV GOLF CONTINUES TO MAKE A RUN AT THE PGA TOUR. HERE'S HOW THE CIRCUITS STACK UP ▸ BY BOB HARIG





PGA TOUR		LIV GOLF
Jay Monahan	COMMISSIONER	Greg Norman
Tiger Woods, **Rory McIlroy**	HEADLINERS	**Phil Mickelson**, Cam Smith
Live under par	SLOGAN	Golf, but louder
72-hole stroke play	FORMAT	54-hole stroke play
Two-tee starts for first two rounds, one tee on weekends	TEE TIMES	Shotgun start
Two-man teams at the Zurich Classic of New Orleans	TEAM FORMAT	Four-man teams each week; top three scores win a secondary cash prize
A billion-dollar television rights deal and weekly title sponsorships	FUNDING	The Public Investment Fund, Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund
Network deals with CBS, NBC, Golf Channel and ESPN for streaming	TV	Nothing domestic (so far) with free streaming at LIVGolf.com, YouTube. (There are over-the-air options internationally, including Canada)
Awarded at all events, except the New Orleans team event	WORLD RANKINGS POINTS	The fight continues
Mostly in the $8 million range; eight "elevated events" have been raised to $20 million; Players Championship pays $25 million	PURSES	$25 million at each event, with $20 million for the individual portion and $5 million for the team aspect. The season-ending team championship has a $50 million purse
Players pay their own expenses to events, with various perks along the way	EXPENSES	All expenses are paid, including up to four airline tickets for a player's family/caddie/coach. Caddie expenses are also paid
Tournaments provide courtesy cars for players while in town	TRANSPORTATION	Black SUVs chauffeur players anywhere they need to go
TPC Sawgrass Stadium Course	SIGNATURE FLORIDA COURSE	Trump National Doral Blue Monster
The Chainsmokers	POPULAR POSTROUND CONCERT CHOICE	The Chainsmokers

SIMON BRUTY (MCILROY); ERICK W. RASCO (MICKELSON); GETTY IMAGES (TV, MONEY)

GIORGIO VIERA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

We'll See You in Court. A Lot.

IN COURTROOMS from San Jose to Jacksonville, the PGA Tour is entangled with the insurgent LIV Golf, hoping to continue operating as it has for the last 40-plus years. At the same time, it seeks to stop LIV from poaching its players while forcing its way into the pro golf ecosystem. LIV has joined an antitrust suit against the Tour, which countersued claiming LIV is encouraging players to breach contracts. A trial is scheduled for 2024.

The PGA Tour is no stranger to the judicial spotlight: In 1989 the manufacturer of Ping clubs sued the PGA Tour over the use of square-groove irons vs. V-shaped grooves. The case was eventually settled.

In 1997 the PGA Tour tried to deny Casey Martin's request to use a golf cart under the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Martin in 2001, but he never made a mark on professional golf, and his right leg was amputated in '21.

The PGA Tour certainly knows legal proceedings are costly and, in the end, leave most parties unhappy with the outcome.

The PGA Tour and LIV Golf have plenty of money—the PGA Tour's coffers are full, and it can tap all kinds of funding vehicles (such as expanding corporate relationships and gaming partnerships) if necessary. LIV has the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia as its benefactor; it has invested a reported $2 billion in LIV and has $620 billion at its disposal.

This ultimately could be a war of attrition with only the lawyers getting rich. Both sides have dug in. Each will likely enjoy wins and endure setbacks as the process plays out, like the jockeying in a typical tournament, where leaders quickly rise and fall. The courtroom stakes are even higher.

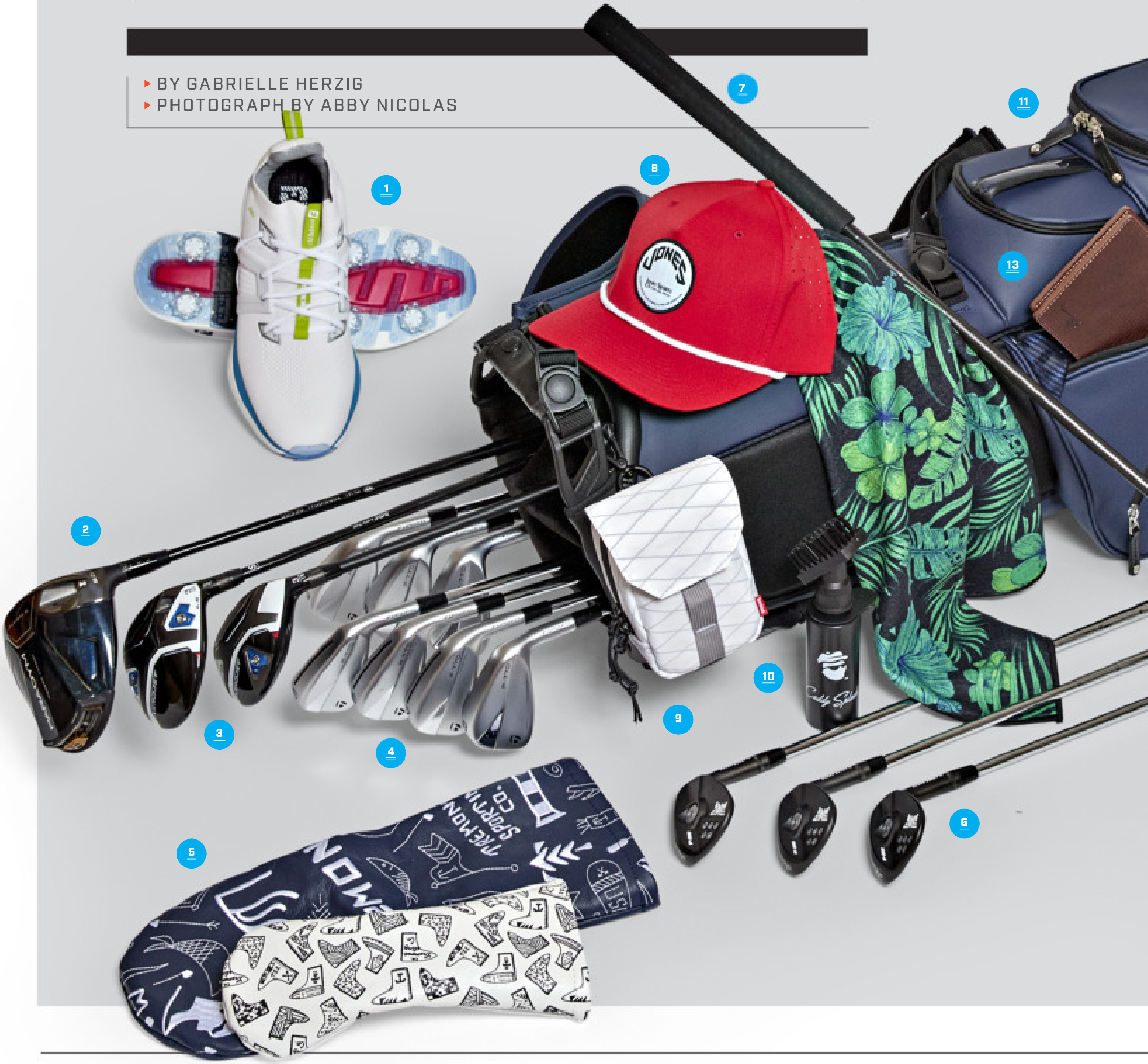
—*Alex Miceli*

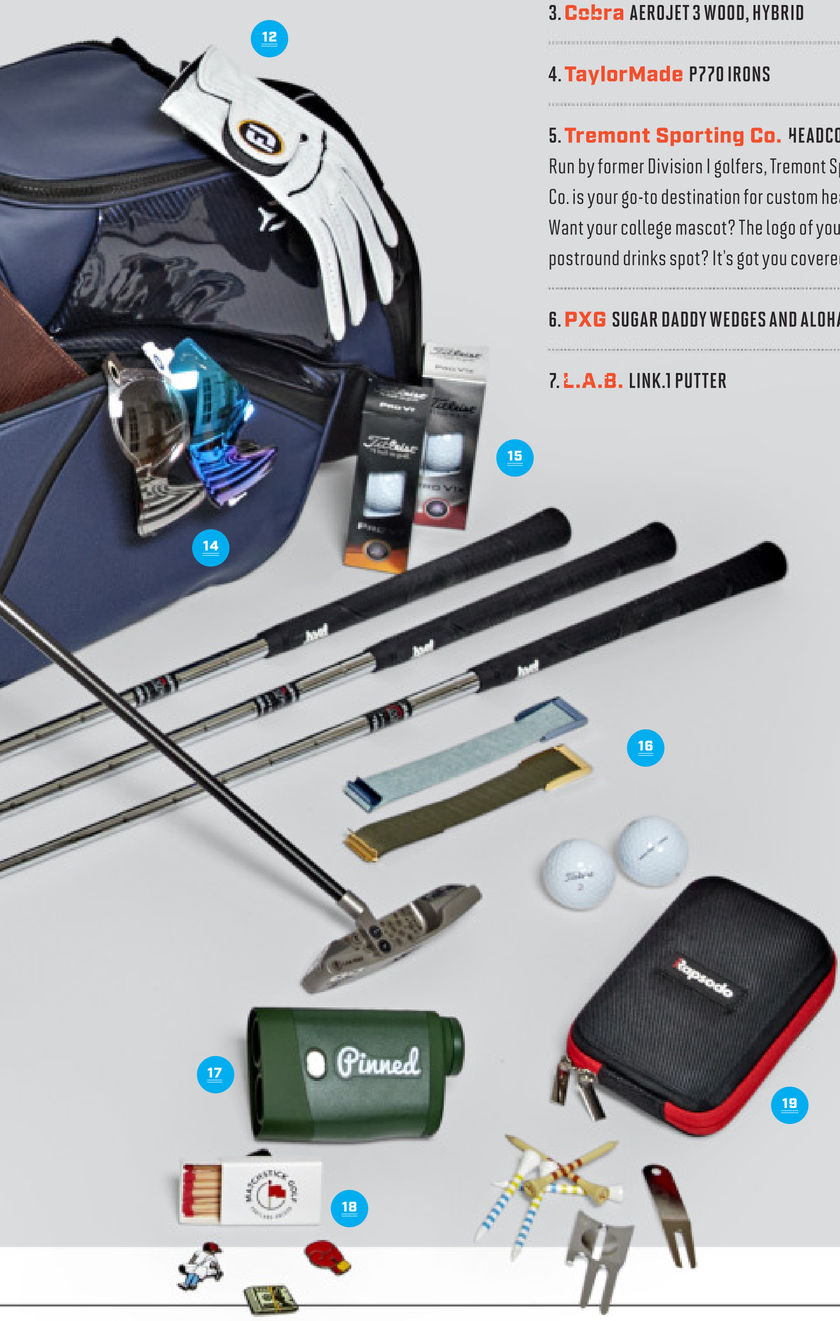
GEAR

DIALED IN

WHETHER YOU'RE A WEEKEND WARRIOR OR A RANGE RAT, THESE ARE THE CLUBS AND ACCESSORIES YOU NEED FOR THE ULTIMATE BAG

▸ BY GABRIELLE HERZIG
▸ PHOTOGRAPH BY ABBY NICOLAS





1. **FootJoy** HYPERFLEX CARBON SHOES

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4. **TaylorMade** P770 IRONS

5. **Tremont Sporting Co.** HEADCOVERS
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7. **L.A.B.** LINK.1 PUTTER

8. **Jones Sports Co.** ROPE HAT
Make a statement with this lid. It has a vintage look but a high-quality, structured feel.

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10. **Caddy Splash** WATER BRUSH
Clean grooves are underrated. This innovative scrub brush stores water in a squeezable tube and makes it simple to keep your club face dirt-free.

11. **Vessel** PLAYER III STAND BAG
This sleek synthetic leather golf bag has a pocket for everything—there's even a lockable pocket inside for your valuables.

12. **FootJoy** HYPERFLEX STASOF GLOVE

13. **Bluegrass** SCORECARD HOLDER

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These lenses will not only protect your eyes from harmful rays, but also give you an edge on the course: The technology helps enhance the difference between the fairway, fringe, greens and rough.

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16. **Whoop** 4.0 ACTIVITY TRACKER
Whoop's fitness band is worn by dozens of pros, including Justin Thomas and Nelly Korda, for a reason: It expertly tracks your sleep and recovery, coaching you to peak performance.

17. **Pinned Golf** PRISM RANGEFINDER

18. **Matchstick** BALL MARKERS

19. **Rapsodo** MOBILE LAUNCH MONITOR
All you need is an iPhone or iPad, and the Rapsodo MLM will take care of the rest. This mobile launch monitor can track your distance, club-head speed, ball speed and more.

FACES IN THE CROWD

▸ *Edited by* **DAN FALKENHEIM** ▸ *Photograph by* **LEBRECHTMEDIA**

RAY FOUGNIER

Home State: **New York**

Date of Birth: **April 5, 1943**

Sport: **Weightlifting**

Classic World Championship Medals: **5**

Raw National Championships: **2**

RAY FOUGNIER fell into competitive powerlifting almost by accident. Nearly 10 years ago, a stranger approached Fougnier while he was working out at the Pigeon Forge Community Center gym in Tennessee and asked whether he'd ever considered competing as a powerlifter. He hadn't, which prompted Fougnier to sign up for a meet in Maryville. He won and qualified for nationals. He won there, too, and the retired teacher has never stopped lifting.

In October, Fougnier squatted 254 pounds, deadlifted 408 pounds and benched 157 pounds at the Amateur Athletic Union Powerlifting World Championships, winning eight gold medals and setting 27 age-group world records. He also was named the AAU Powerlifting Senior Male Athlete of the Year—the third time he's won the award—and Strength Sports Overall Male Athlete of the Year.

"I never anticipated anything like this," says Fougnier, a member of the Oneida Indian Nation. "But it's had a very positive influence. It's really given me some direction."

Before his retirement, Fougnier spent 40 years in education as a high school teacher and administrator, and was the inaugural director of Cornell's American Indian Program. Now, he's working with the AAU to set up programs to help get Native American youth more involved with sports. "There are a lot of reservations where there's very little infrastructure," he says. "We can get groups across the country, especially in the more rural areas, involved."

As he enters his 80s, Fougnier has his eye on setting marks in the 80–84 age group. "The records there aren't anything that are a challenge for me. I'm not bragging about that, but that's just the way it is," he says. "Almost every time I lift the weight, it's going to be a world record." —*Carlos Stinson-Maas*

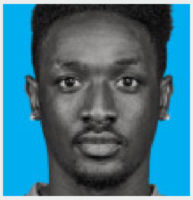
FOOTBALL

▼ ▼ ▼ ▼

GOLDEN BOOT

▸ DOWN BY ONE with 1:55 left in the Nebraska Class A title game, Omaha Westside kicker Tristan Alvano was approached by his QB. *I'm going to get you in range.* Alvano warmed up by his kicking net as the offense proceeded to drive 40 yards. Four seconds remained on the clock when Alvano lined up from the 27. He sailed his fifth and final field goal of the game 45 yards through the uprights to lift the Warriors to a 43–41 victory over Gretna.

The next morning the senior woke up to a surprise. The Huskers' interim coach had attended the game and called to offer Alvano a full-ride scholarship. "It's felt like a dream," says Alvano, who committed to the program in December. "It's been crazy. I just can't put it into words." —D.F.



NATHAN OPOKU ▸ Sport: **Soccer** ▸ Hometown: **Accra, Ghana**

Opoku, a sophomore forward at Syracuse, scored one goal and had an assist in a 2–2 (7–6 PKs) victory over Indiana, helping the Orange to their first national championship in the program's 102-year history. Named the College Cup's Most Outstanding Offensive Player, he also assisted on the game-winning goal in Syracuse's semifinal win against Creighton and led the team with 30 points on 11 goals and eight assists this season.

BIRGEN NELSON ▸ Sport: **Track and Field** ▸ Hometown: **Edina, Minn.**

Nelson, a senior hurdler at Gustavus Adolphus College, broke the NCAA Division III record in the 60-meter hurdles (8.38 seconds) at the University of Minnesota Icebreaker Open. A five-time All-American, Nelson won the 2022 NCAA D-III outdoor title in the 100-meter hurdles with a meet-record 13.44 seconds last May.

NOMINATE NOW

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The Lost Art Of the NBA

BY CHRIS BALLARD

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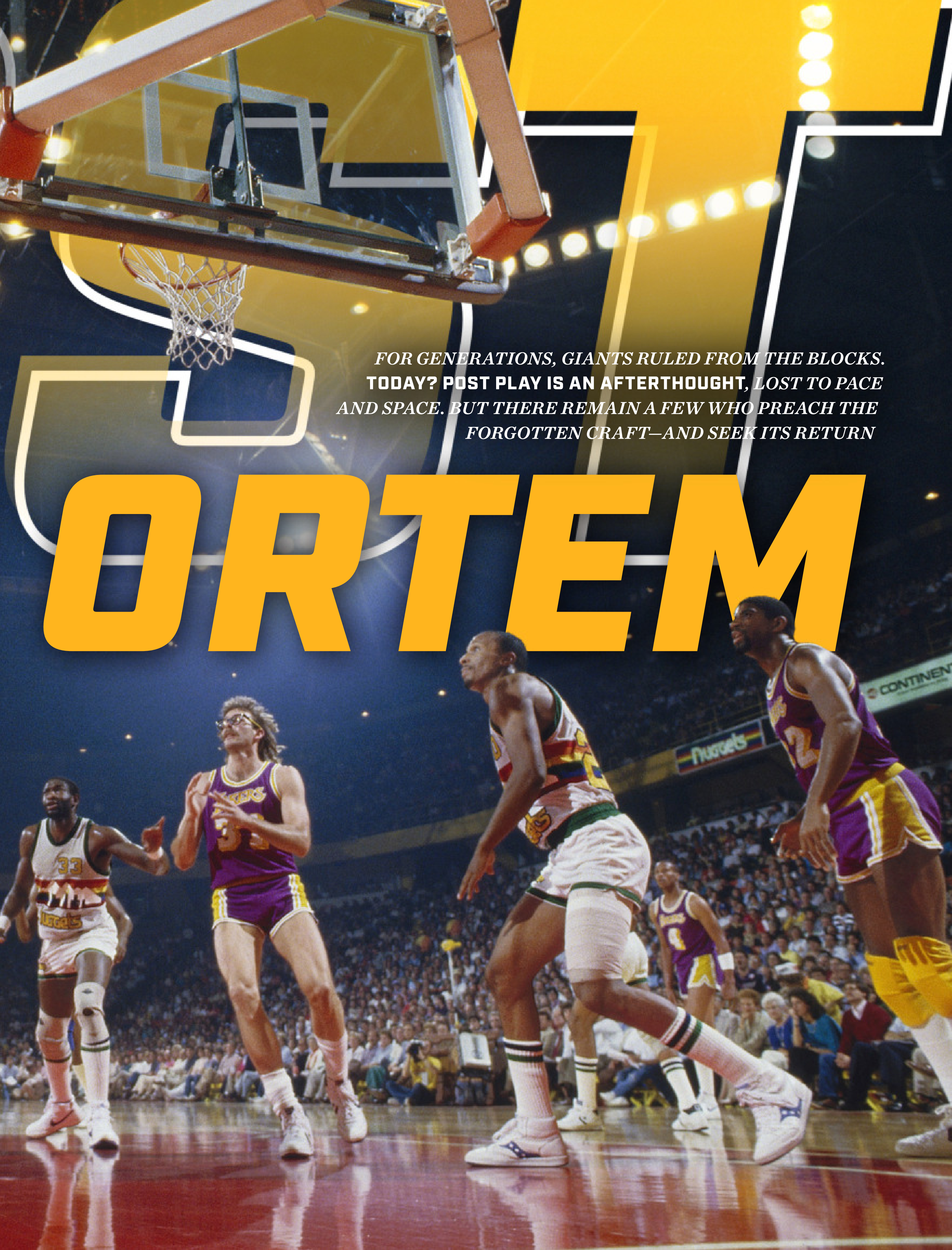
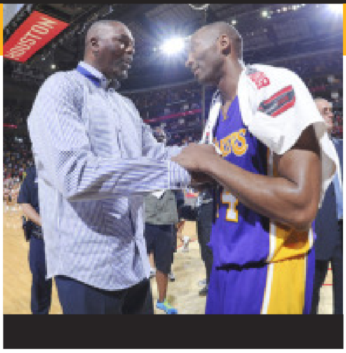


ST
ORTEM

FOR GENERATIONS, GIANTS RULED FROM THE BLOCKS. **TODAY? POST PLAY IS AN AFTERTHOUGHT,** *LOST TO PACE AND SPACE. BUT THERE REMAIN A FEW WHO PREACH THE FORGOTTEN CRAFT—AND SEEK ITS RETURN*

In the summer of 2009, shortly after winning his fourth championship with the Lakers, Kobe Bryant flew from Los Angeles to Houston. From there, he headed an hour west by car, past exurbs and strip malls and into rolling farmland. A winding road brought him to a set of iron gates and, just down the way, a gymnasium. Inside awaited the man Kobe had crossed the country to see—a man Bryant believed could take his game to the next level.



CENTER STAGES

Post moves were once so integral that stars like Kobe sought out Olajuwon for tutelage. Today, only a few, like Jokić (right), use them.

Hakeem Olajuwon had retired seven years earlier, after winning two titles and an MVP award with the Rockets. Though a dominant defensive force, he was perhaps best known for his graceful post moves, a series of spins, feints and fadeaways that caught defenders wrong-footed, leaving them trying to defend a man who had, in a split second, vanished. His signature shimmy even gained its own nickname, "The Dream Shake."

After retiring, Olajuwon had purchased a 400-acre ranch near Katy, Texas, and converted a livestock barn into a state-of-the-art gym with a full-length NBA court. The gym soon became something of a mecca for lead-footed big men. Coaches and NBA general managers called, beseeching Olajuwon to tutor one of their centers. (Such was demand, it is said, that teams paid up to tens of thousands of dollars per session.)

In Kobe's case, he tracked down Olajuwon after the Lakers played the Rockets in Houston. "I want to come out this summer and work with you," Bryant said. At first, Olajuwon couldn't tell whether Kobe was serious. But this is Kobe we're talking about. Yes, he was very, very serious.

And so, later that year, Bryant stood under the basket in Olajuwon's gym, listening as Hakeem covered the subtleties of the craft. How to feel a defender's presence and react to the slightest weight imbalance. How to jump when catching the entry pass, so that, even before landing, you're already on the move. How to use footwork and agility to build moves, much like how a boxer constructs a combination, jabbing and misdirecting.

Bryant caught on quickly—"fastest learner I ever coached," Olajuwon says—and began deploying the moves that fall. Two years later LeBron James flew out and stayed for three days of instruction, hoping to learn how to punish smaller players on the block. (Olajuwon didn't charge Kobe or LeBron.)

ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

DENVER
15
ROBINSON-EARL
50
MIDFIRST
BANK

GREG NELSON

That the two best players on the planet would travel to the farmland of Texas to train under Olajuwon, seekers ascending Drop-Step Mountain to see the guru at the top, tells you just how valuable these skills once were.

But that was more than a decade ago—and a decade is an eternity in NBA time.

At first slowly, and then all at once, the game evolved, migrating ever farther from the basket. Seven-footers left the trenches to roam the perimeter, launch threes and create off the dribble; modern bigs aspired to be Kevin Durant, not Kevin McHale. Fewer people called Olajuwon. Now, he says, “Nobody posts up anymore.”

Indeed, the most prolific post-up teams today, like the Nuggets and the 76ers, attempt only six or so shots per game from the block, or half as many as the league-average team in 2010. Meanwhile, even the least prolific three-point-shooting teams today, the ones that are generally pretty terrible at it, like the Lakers, launch 30 threes per game.

Some—perhaps most—would say this isn’t such a bad thing, that the current pace-and-space league is an upgrade over watching centers methodically backing down defenders, like the typewriter giving way to the keyboard, or the landline to the cellphone.

But with all evolutions something is also lost. Sometimes it’s just a nuance—the satisfying metallic clack of an old-fashioned typewriter. Other times it’s an entire culture or a language.

So, what now becomes of the post game and the true believers who still teach it and preach it? I flew to Houston to find out what it’s like to watch something you love fade away.

IN EARLY NOVEMBER, I made the same drive Kobe and LeBron once did, following I-10 west from the city. Olajuwon has generally kept a low profile these past years, and his name is rarely mentioned anymore. The reference points are fewer. After all, we see echoes of Magic, Michael and Larry in today’s game. But Hakeem? He’s like a relic from another era.

It may be hard to envision today, in a time of Victor Wembanyamas and Bol Bols, but eons ago, in the Pleistocene age of the NBA, big men ruled from the block.

Back then, a coach’s job was simple: Send your giant as close to the basket as possible, then supply the ball. So dominant was George Mikan that the NBA doubled the width of the key from six to 12 feet in 1951, in an attempt to push him farther from the rim. A decade later, the league added four feet in hopes of slowing Wilt Chamberlain, who was two seasons removed from averaging 50 points—not for a stretch of games, but for the *season*—while rarely attempting a shot outside of eight feet. (The ploy worked—sort of. His scoring average dropped to *only* 34.7 ppg.)

Chamberlain’s successor, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, set the all-time scoring record largely by unfurling one graceful skyhook after another, the same song on repeat for an entire career. During one stretch ending in 1980, a back-to-the-basket center won league MVP in 20 out of 21 seasons. (Oscar Robertson heroically bucked the tide in ’64.) Because of this, teams ruthlessly vied for talented centers and took chances on untalented ones, hoping they might pan out. As the saying went: You can’t teach height. But you can teach post moves, and, during that era, one man became the oracle of the post.

Pete Newell didn’t intend to take on the mantle; it just sort of happened. A Navy man during

World War II, he became a decorated coach, leading the U.S. to the 1960 Olympic gold and racking up victories at Cal. Such was his intensity that, in season, Newell subsisted on what seemed like little more than coffee and cigarettes, regularly dropping 20 pounds. Doctors told him he'd die young if he kept it up, so, after a stint as the Lakers' GM, he retired and instead started tutoring players informally, beginning with two forwards, Kermit Washington of the Lakers and Kiki VanDeWeghe, then at UCLA. The workouts were unlike any either man had ever experienced.

For three hours at a time during the summer, in a gym in Los Angeles, Newell provided a crash course in the dark arts of post play, reframing a physical game as a mental one. He taught that players were not just right-handed or left-handed, but also right-footed or left-footed. He explained that basketball is a game of counters—and there's a counter to everything. As long as you waited for your opportunity, it would present itself. “It sounds simple, but it takes a little while to get the idea,” says VanDeWeghe.

> ***“I MISS IT,” BROOK LOPEZ SAYS. “THE ONE-ON-ONE ASPECT, GOING UP AGAINST SOMEONE AND SEEING IF YOUR ARSENAL OF MOVES COULD BEAT THEIRS.”***

Word got out. In the years that followed, others called upon Newell: Bill Walton, James Worthy, Bernard King. Even Abdul-Jabbar came, hoping for help. Defenders were sitting on his left shoulder, waiting for the skyhook. So Newell helped him fashion a new counter—a *left*-handed hook. Even if Abdul-Jabbar shot it only 5% of the time, that would be enough to give defenders pause.

In time, Newell formalized his approach into Pete Newell's Big Man Camp, which he held for three decades. (Newell never made money. “It was his way of giving back to the game,” says Pete Newell Jr., his eldest son, a decorated high school coach.) If you were an NBA GM and had a big, gangly draft pick, you made damn sure you sent him to Pete. Same went for the stars, including Olajuwon, whom Newell deemed one of his best students. When Shaq arrived, he was frustrated that defenders pushed him before the catch, so Newell taught him a counter, spinning to the baseline. Even in Newell's late 80s, resourceful parents like Deborah Ledford, the mother of high school 7-footers Brook and Robin Lopez, came calling, driving from Fresno to L.A. seeking tutelage for her sons.

Even so, the game was already changing. Three years before Newell died in 2008 at 93, he lamented to the *Los Angeles Times* that a generation was being “over-coached but under-taught.” One wonders what he'd think of the era that ensued.

EXACTLY HOW AND why the post game vanished is a matter of debate. Some go back to the addition of the three-point line, in 1979, originally installed as another anti-big-man measure. Others point to the long-term effect of rule modifications. Tired of low-scoring wrestling matches, the NBA in '94 began strictly enforcing existing hand-checking measures on the perimeter. Now, a wing like Michael Jordan could attack without an enforcer's grappling hooks in his hips. But a big with his back turned? “You could still maul him,” says Jeff Van Gundy, who coached a succession of top centers, from Patrick Ewing to Yao Ming to Dikembe Mutombo.

Eight years later, in 2002, the NBA went one step further and legalized zone defenses, effectively eliminating a post player's air space. Whereas coaches once had to choose whether to send a hard double team on the catch, now help D could float nearby or sandwich a big before he even got the ball. Even the most basic post entry pass became perilous.

Then, of course, there's the Dirk-ification of the game. That traces all the way back to FIBA's superwide trapezoidal lane, forcing American bigs away from the hoop. (As you can see, the history of basketball is largely a history of penalizing tall people for being tall.) This encouraged international bigs to learn the game by facing up, away from the basket, and thus Dirk Nowitzki begat Kristaps Porziņģis and Giannis Antetokounmpo and Nikola Jokić.

Sure, you may be thinking, but we all know what *really* killed the post-up, the stake through its old-school heart. NBA teams finally did the math: 3 > 2. Hoops analytics may have begun on the fringe, but

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

by the mid-2010s, the revolution was complete. Three-pointers and free throws were the new Holy Grail. Midrange shots and post moves were anathema. By '15, *Grantland*'s Zach Lowe was asking whether, in its zeal to make the game more exciting, "the league inadvertently killed the back-to-the-basket game."

No player's career better illustrates that sea change than that of Newell's former pupil Brook Lopez. First at Stanford and then with the Nets in the early 2010s, Lopez starred on the block, deploying an array of soft half hooks and bank shots. For the first eight years of his NBA career, Lopez scored 20 a game while rarely, if ever, attempting a three-pointer. "I absolutely loved posting up," Lopez says. Then, in the summer before the '16–17 season, Nets coach Kenny Atkinson told him to start practicing his threes. That season, Lopez launched *five* threes a game, or two more than Larry Bird did in any year of his career. Lopez adapted and survived, but others struggled. (RIP, Greg Monroe's NBA career.) The Warriors asked bigs not to post up but to set screens, roll and become pocket passers, preaching, "on time, on target." Centers who couldn't shoot became a liability—as did those who couldn't guard on the perimeter on a switch, leaving them marooned against the likes of Trae Young and Steph Curry, launching 26-footers off the dribble.

Spacing became the new currency of the league. Everyone needed to be able to shoot. "It's like mining for gold or going after oil," says Bucks assistant coach Mike Dunlap. "Everyone's fighting for more space to operate, because the players are so quick and long."

Dunlap has a unique perspective. He got his start helping Newell at his workouts in the early 1980s, bringing towels for Washington and VanDeWeghe, then stuck with the coach through the Big Man camps. Dunlap is as close as there comes to a living disciple of Newell not named Newell. And yet now he coaches Lopez and Giannis, two prime examples of the game's evolution. "The game used to be east-west," says Dunlap. "Now it's north-south."

This is not to say skilled post-up players don't still exist in the NBA; it's just that teams don't give them many opportunities. This season, only one player, Jokić, has posted up more than five times per game. To find other post-up specialists you often need to look down to the end of a team's bench—we see you, Kenneth Lofton Jr.—or, more often, to its guards. (In particular, Jalen Brunson and Marcus Smart are good at exploiting mismatches.)

For the most part, though, the post-up is, as Van Gundy says, "dying a pretty quick death." Whereas guards like Kobe once hoped to acquire

MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU

Olajuwon and Shaq each attended Newell's camp, where they studied the art—and power—of post play.

the skills of big men, now big men, such as Joel Embiid, seek out training gurus like Drew Hanlen, a former collegiate point guard, to help them play like Kobe.

This feeds into a continuous cycle, as Newell Jr. sees it: Players today don't recognize how to play and pass to the post. Why not? Because they're not taught. And why aren't they taught? Because no one wants to—or knows how to—teach it anymore. "Most coaches [across the sport today] were perimeter players when they played," he says. "So they can't see the game through the center's eyes."

Indeed, ask around and there is no Pete Newell Sr. of today. This is not surprising. Supply and demand, etc. If the Warriors post up only twice a game—the pace they're at this season—why would they focus on teaching it?

One guru does remain, of course.

AT 11 A.M., Olajuwon meets me at the gate to his ranch in a black SUV and leads the way down a cracked driveway, past a chicken coop, to his gym. Inside, mementos fill glass cases in the foyer, not far from a plaque with Quranic verses that Olajuwon finds inspiring. (Raised in Nigeria, he rededicated himself to Islam in the early 1990s and maintains a second home in Amman, Jordan.) To the left is a sort of press row, with stools and a long table. To the right, men's and women's locker rooms.

At 60, Olajuwon is fit and trim, and his hair is shorn close to the scalp. His laugh is deep and warm. There is a lightness to him. He is a gracious host and, to my surprise, alone: no assistant or helper. Just Hakeem, his gym and a cooler of drinks he brought.

Olajuwon leads the way across the court to a pair of chairs. We start at the beginning. How he grew up playing handball, soccer and table tennis. How a basketball coach at Lagos State recruited him, then pointed to the paint and said, "That is your jurisdiction," a dictate he took to heart at the University of Houston and then with the Rockets.

Upon retiring, he began teaching. A host of players came through: Emeka Okafor, Marcin Gortat, Rudy Gay, Dwight Howard, Amar'e Stoudemire. He says working with Kobe was especially gratifying. "He loved the post! He said any time he's playing, he's beating the big guys to the post, and they say, 'Get out of my post!' And they push him out, but he wants to stay there."

Because of Bryant's skill and footwork, the pair could jump straight to advanced moves; the following season, Kobe executed one flawlessly when the Lakers played in Houston, shaking free of Shane Battier for a fadeaway and then winking at Olajuwon, who was courtside.

As for James, he showed up months after losing in the 2011 Finals with the Heat. "What was lacking in his game was the post," says Olajuwon. "I told him he should use his leverage. Just muscle and seal against guards." James started at the beginning, but Olajuwon says he level-jumped in three days. "It was a joy to work with guys like that, who are already great on their own and want to add to their game."

These days, Olajuwon trains only Rockets players, part of an exclusive deal he signed with the team. At practice, and as time permits, he tutors those interested, including 6' 11" center Alperen Şengün.

That means he watches today's stars from afar, and he sees the possibilities. Take Embiid. Olajuwon likes

LEBRON JAMES

JOEL EMBIID

GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO

him and has given him advice, but he has questions. "He's got all the moves, but *leveraging* the moves is different. Why would he be shooting threes?" Olajuwon asks. "He has the advantage every night, and if I have the advantage, I'm going to wear you out."

But threes? "That's settling! When I'm tired, I settle. You don't settle when you're trying to win. You don't start the game settling!"

Next is Giannis, whom Olajuwon generally loves. But oh, the missed opportunities! He brings up a recent game where Antetokounmpo spun baseline for a dunk. "Beautiful move," The Dream assesses, "but the step was not right. The idea was right, and it was successful, but he spun from the wrong leg."

This, Olajuwon says, is the next level, one hidden to most, like a secret stage in a real-life video game. The next time Giannis makes that move, Olajuwon explains, the defender might know it's coming, and then Giannis won't get by on athleticism. *But spin off the left foot . . .*

We head out to the court so Olajuwon can demonstrate. I've recruited a former collegiate and overseas center as a workout partner. At 6' 7" and 235 pounds, Tom Poser is built for inside banging. But that's not the only reason I've asked him to come.

Poser came of age during the heyday of post play. As a tall, skilled teenager in San Anselmo, Calif., in the 1980s, he modeled his game after Olajuwon's. Working at Broadway Video, he'd check out the *Hakeem the Dream* instructional video, watch a move, pause it and then head out to the driveway to mimic it. Poser walked on at UC Santa Barbara and then chased his basketball dream in the IBA and overseas, in Austria and Switzerland. He was strong and worked hard, but that isn't what kept him around. "Any success I had was due to learning those moves," he says.

When he gave up chasing the game, at 28, Poser went on to a career in commercial real estate, but he never relinquished his passion, running big man clinics, coaching at camps and, now, at 46, overseeing a Catholic Youth Organization program and deploying his array of post moves and countermoves in adult rec leagues (which is where I first met him). Poser is the kind of guy who, if you buy him a beer, is liable to use it, along with a salt shaker and his cellphone, to start diagramming proper post-entry position. All of which is to say that, were you to search for devotees of this particular, peculiar craft—standing with your back to the basket, isolated in a moment and within the geography of the court, tasked with outthinking the human behind you—you'd be hard-pressed to find someone more committed. My hope is that, by getting these two together, I might better understand their shared passion.

GREG NELSON (JAMES); DAVID E. KLUTHO (EMBIID); STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES (ANTETOKOUNMPO)

Out on the court, Poser is already warming up with crab dribbles. Olajuwon takes an immediate interest. “Why are you dribbling with two hands?”

Poser explains: the better to secure it for going up strong. Olajuwon responds: no, no. You should use one hand, like in a game.

And with that, they’re off, talking about angles and positioning and move progression. Poser begins demonstrating Olajuwon’s moves to Olajuwon, and, as he does, Olajuwon turns to me with a huge smile. He was expecting to go through the motions for a journalist, and now *this?* “This guy is a master!” he says, cackling. “It’s beautiful!”

They head to the baseline, breaking down that Giannis move. In fact, they spend five minutes talking solely about foot placement on the baseline. (Olajuwon: “This foot here, we spin—*whoosh!*—and then we jump in.”) Next come fadeaways and pivots. (Poser: “What I find is that if I dip and then you commit, this whole other thing shows up.”) Olajuwon underlines the importance of reading an opponent’s body. (“This is a surprise move. If you challenge it, then I read it wrong.”)

It’s all very high level. Their geeky joy is evident, like two Tolkien nerds discovering, *Hey, someone else can speak fluent Elvish!* Every once in a while, they remember me and turn to explain something, dumbing it down as if I speak a different language, which I guess I do. I feel a bit like I’m crashing someone else’s high school reunion.

Soon enough they’re on the block. Usually the NBA wears down big men—their knees and backs go first, then they gain weight. Not Olajuwon. He remains fluid and graceful, spinning and pivoting. (His only workout, he says, involves lunges and low-chair squats.) He wouldn’t look terribly out of place if you stuck him into an NBA game for five minutes and asked him to guard, say, Kevon Looney. At one point he demonstrates how to create space and lowers his shoulder into Poser—*boom!*—who goes flying back one foot and then turns to me, astonished. *This dude’s 60?!*

By the time they’re 30 minutes in, Olajuwon is really getting into it. He’s calling for the ball to fire wing jumpers, drenched in sweat, Poser rebounding and exhorting him. Finally, Olajuwon declares himself worn out and heads to the sideline. He distributes a few smoothies from his cooler and starts telling stories.

He talks about post-up guards like Gary Payton and Tim Hardaway. (He says he was told to double Hardaway in the post.) He talks about the defenders who gave him trouble. Not Anthony Mason. (“Too small.”) Not Mark Eaton. (“Tough, but you could face him up.”) No, the really challenging ones were heavy and mechanical. Like . . . Greg Kite.

“*Greg Kite?*” Poser asks. “I didn’t expect his name to come up today.”

Olajuwon nods. “And Frank Brickowski.”

Poser and I look at each other. Then Olajuwon says something even more surprising—something that makes me pause: “I never really liked being a center.”

In fact, Olajuwon says he totally understands why the game turned out the way it did. “The traditional big-man game is boring!” he says. “I didn’t want to play center. I wanted to handle the ball like guards. When I played in the summertime, I got the rebound and I didn’t want to pass to the guard. I’m bringing it down! I’m freelancing! That’s more fun. You’re more engaged in the game.”

Indeed, Olajuwon is one of the old-school bigs who would likely translate best to today’s game—long, rangy, athletic, agile. “He’d be just as dominant,” says Stan Van Gundy, who coached some of the biggest of them all, including Shaq, Howard and Andre Drummond. One can imagine Olajuwon handling on the perimeter, Eurostepping to the hoop.

That wasn’t allowed in his day, though. He wasn’t even allowed to dribble—“Not one bounce!” He says that if he ever floated to the wing and a guard passed him the ball, his early coaches would immediately sub out that guard. The message to Olajuwon: *Get back in your cage!*

He shakes his head. “The moment the season starts, it’s back in the cage.”

He can’t help but watch the modern game and be envious of the freedom allowed to players like Antetokounmpo. Which brings Olajuwon to another modern big. The one who he thinks shows the way forward—who provides a glimmer of hope for the survival of the post-up game, perhaps not as the *only* thing but as *a* thing. Not just an afterthought.

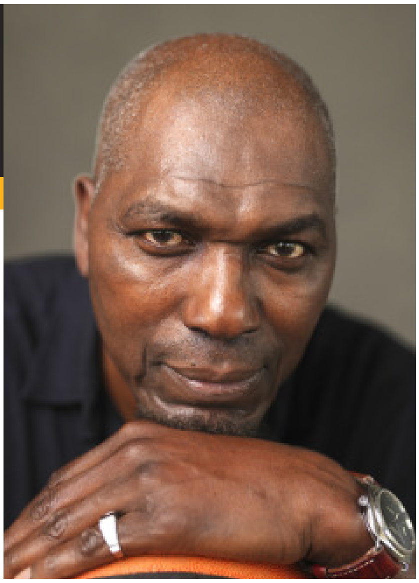
“The Joker,” Olajuwon says. “I love the Joker!”

> ***“[JOKIĆ’S] SHOT, HIS FAKES, THEY***
> ***TO TIME,” SAYS OLAJUWON. “YOU***
> ***HE’S FAKING AND WHEN IT’S REAL.***

AH, YES, Nikola Jokić, product of the northern Serbian city of Sombor, ungainly son of an agricultural engineer, who grew into an ungainly teenager and, eventually, arguably, the best basketball player in the world.

In Jokić you can see the game's history come to life—a lumbering big man who overpowers smaller defenders with an array of post moves. But you also see the future. He shoots threes not to settle but to complement his other moves. He plays point center, a Don Nelson fever dream in the flesh. He is not only the best-passing big man ever—sorry, Arvydas Sabonis—but also arguably the best passer alive. (No doubt LeBron would take umbrage at this claim.)

ARE VERY DIFFICULT DON'T KNOW WHEN HE HAS TRICKS!”



DREAM SEQUENCE

Olajuwon still enjoys passing down his knowledge to others, like Poser (below left), so they can master the craft, and carry it on.

DARREN CARROLL (2)

The biggest reason someone like Olajuwon loves Jokić is that Jokić does it all, not with overwhelming athleticism and strength, like Giannis, but with craft and timing. With counters for his counters. “He's playing the game, and you think he's not serious, but he's so effective,” marvels Olajuwon. “He doesn't look strong, but I see he gets such deep post position. I think maybe it's the mismatch, but then he does the same thing against bigger guys. His shot, his fakes, they are very difficult to time. You don't know when he's faking and when it's real. He has tricks!”

Olajuwon nods. “He's the one.”

Indeed, despite all this talk about the death of the post-up, you could argue that we're currently watching something of a renaissance for NBA bigs. In the past four years, Giannis and Jokić have both won two MVP awards, with last year's race coming down to one giant center, Embiid, versus another, Jokić.

This development can lead some, like Poser, to feel optimistic. Sports are cyclical, after all. Maybe the post-up could still return to glory. It remains a force in the high school and college game, where someone like Drew Timme can dominate on the block. Why not in the NBA?

That would make someone like Jeff Van Gundy happy. He says he understands why the game has evolved—you can't fight the math. “But it's all so homogeneous,” he says. Gone is the variety of offenses, from the triangle to the post-up to motion. “Everybody plays the same style [and] who makes the most threes in a game wins.”

Van Gundy doesn't think the game will change unless the rules do—just as it took new guidelines to kneecap the post game in the first place. Here's one idea to diversify the game: Literally create more space, to accommodate longer, larger players and advanced defenses. Maybe add a few feet to the sideline—“and why not behind the backboard, while you're at it?” he says. In the end, he dismisses this as a near impossibility, because of the revenue lost from reducing courtside seating. Or what about, he suggests, eliminating the corner three below the break? Then you wouldn't have two guys stationed in the corners like they're waiting for a bus all game long.

Stan Van Gundy is more optimistic, believing it will eventually cycle back. Already, he says, you can see glimpses, for example, in how all the switching defenses lead to mismatches that beg to be exploited, something the Suns do well. Or how the Warriors use the post as a passing position. Or how the Mavericks post Luka Dončić, who may have the best footwork in the league, or the way the Kings often use Domantas Sabonis as the fulcrum of their offense. Even in a three-point-centric league, you still have to *create* those threes. “Forcing defenses to double-team or help, that’s never going to go away as a concept,” he says. “And depending on your team, the post-up may be one of the most effective ways you’ve got to put two guys on the ball.”

So maybe this is how the post game will survive, not returning as it was but mutating. Maybe the evolution is just multifaceted. Maybe post play will become many things. Guards will deploy it as part of their arsenal, the way Jrue Holiday does today with the Bucks. Bigs will use it to keep defenses honest for their face-up moves, like Jokić. And, on occasion, it will have its moment in the sun, like during a recent run of Bucks injuries. Looking around his roster, coach Mike Budenholzer got an idea: There in the back of his offensive closet, a little dusty but still quite usable, lay Brook Lopez’s post game.

So, for a glorious stretch in November, Lopez feasted in the post. He dropped 25 against the Thunder, then 24 two games later. “I gave them the full repertoire,” Lopez says, laughing. “My teammates called it ‘Brooklyn Brook.’ ” Part of his effectiveness no doubt had to do with the relative novelty of what the Bucks were doing; teams now scout Lopez as a three-point marksman, not a beast on the block. “They probably don’t even remember which shoulder I’m going to shoot my jump hook on.” (It’s the left; always the left.)

OPEN BROOK

As the game evolved, Lopez became a perimeter threat. But he still knows his way around the block.

MICHAEL GONZALES/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

Count Lopez among those who long for the glory days of the post game, even as he prides himself on being a complete player. “I won’t lie. I miss it,” he says. “The one-on-one aspect, going up against someone and seeing if your arsenal of moves could beat theirs.”

And here’s where it’s worth trying to distill what, exactly, is being lost. To many, a post-up may just be a rather methodical offensive move in a generally unmethodical game. But to aficionados? To them, the post game is swooping hooks and sneaky step-ins. It’s Tim Duncan’s elbow bank and Zach Randolph’s earthbound wizardry. It’s defenders staying down on the second, third and fourth fakes, only to bite on the fifth. It’s your dad backing you down in the driveway, old and slow now but still nails on that reverse up-and-under. It’s the game, and life, distilled to its simplest and most primal form, stripped of all the noise: just two humans facing off, each hoping to outwit the other.

To try to master the craft—to find joy in the trying—perhaps that is the appeal to men like Poser and Olajuwon. Take what happened at the end of our time together in Houston.

One hour at Olajuwon’s had turned into two, then three. He had to get back to the city, to his day job in real estate. (“My new go-to move.”) And yet he couldn’t help himself.

As we stood on the concrete patio behind his gym, surrounded by hayfields and cornstalks, he watched as Poser tried once more to perfect that spin move—the one where you pirouette on the baseline without going out of bounds.

Olajuwon took the ball and demonstrated. “See? Very simple.”

Poser tried again.

Olajuwon frowned. He took Poser’s shoulders and pivoted him 20 degrees toward the baseline. “That’s what you’re doing wrong.”

“Ahhh!” said Poser. He swung his inside leg in a tighter arc.

“Yes!” said Olajuwon. “Then it becomes easy!”

The old center grinned, watching as Poser tried it again, then again, then again, drilling the move into his muscle memory, fitting one more piece into the puzzle. Keeping the flame alive. “Now,” Olajuwon said, “you take it back with you.” ☐

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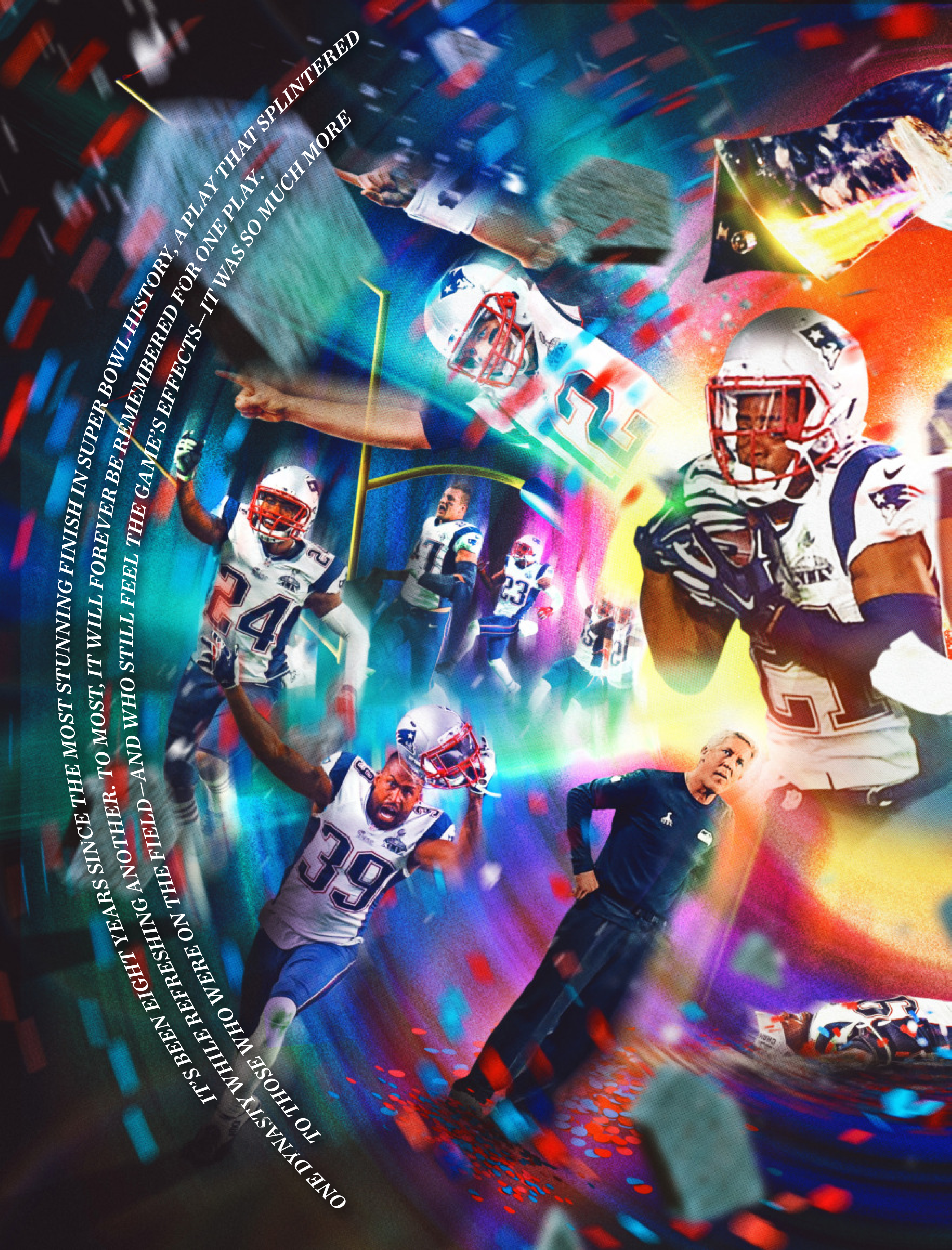


IT'S BEEN EIGHT YEARS SINCE THE MOST STUNNING FINISH IN SUPER BOWL HISTORY, A PLAY THAT SPLINTERED ONE DYNASTY WHILE REFRESHING ANOTHER. TO MOST, IT WILL FOREVER BE REMEMBERED FOR ONE PLAY. TO THOSE WHO WERE ON THE FIELD—AND WHO STILL FEEL THE GAME'S EFFECTS—IT WAS SO MUCH MORE

THE XLIXERS

BY GREG BISHOP

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE SPORTING PRESS

OUT ON A LIMB

Kearse's catch might have gone down as the biggest play in Super Bowl history—if not for the one that came two plays later.

Marshawn Lynch remains, unapologetically, himself. That's Lynch on the Zoom screen in mid-December, clad in a black sweatshirt, hood up, G-U-C-C-I in rainbow letters across his chest. Smoke from two wine-flavored Black & Mild cigars wafts into and out of view.

He makes one thing clear immediately. Even though he has a robust career highlight reel, built over 12 decorated, bruising and, shall we say, distinct NFL seasons, when you hear his name your mind will immediately go to The Handoff That Never Happened. Or, as Lynch puts it, "My biggest play of my career had nothing to do with me.

"How long ago was that play?"

Almost eight years have passed since that night in Arizona, the last time the site of this year's Super Bowl hosted the event. Lynch lets out a sigh, one born more of disbelief than resignation, over the second-and-goal play from the 1-yard line in the final minute of Super Bowl XLIX. He says the day before this interview, a stranger approached him: "*Man, I wish they had gave you the ball in that Super Bowl situation....* " Lynch says he hears that at least once a week.

Everyone remembers Malcolm Butler, the undrafted rookie cornerback who stole the game with a goal line interception, securing the Patriots' 28–24 victory. The play represents the most drastic turn of events in the history of the NFL's biggest game. But Super Bowl XLIX brought so many other moments that could have altered careers and legacies—some still did. For many who watched that night, those plays are lost to time. But those who played remember, just as much as they still feel the game's aftermath almost a decade later.

JULIAN EDELMAN ENTERED that season—fresh off his breakout 105-catch campaign in 2013—unbearably ringless. It had been a decade since the Patriots' last Super Bowl victory, and Edelman, then a sixth-year receiver, was sick of hearing about the Troy Brown–Tedy Bruschi–Willie McGinest glory days. They had won titles, shaped a dynasty, deserved all the accolades, but that generation of Patriots was gone. A championship for Edelman's Patriots would mean his

PREVIOUS SPREAD: SIMON BRUTY (3); ROBERT BECK (2); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (2); JOHN BIEVER; JOHN IACONO; DONALD MIRALLE; CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES

team would "finally start [a generation of] our own."

To Edelman, the game-altering moment in Super Bowl XLIX came at the end of the first quarter. To that point the game had been a slog (both teams were scoreless 20 minutes in). With a little less than two minutes left in the first quarter, New England facing third down at the Seattle 10, the Seahawks' defense made a play—and paid a price.

Jeremy Lane, Seattle's nickel corner, intercepted a Tom Brady pass and was upended during the run back. In bracing his fall he sustained a gruesome injury: Above his left wrist, his arm snapped. It was revealed later that Lane also tore his ACL on the play.

"I WAS MURDERING HIM," BALDWIN SAYS OF CORNERBACK REVIS. HIS FRUSTRATION OVER HIS LIGHT USE WAS A **HARBINGER OF THE TEAM'S COMING DISCORD.**

THIS SPREAD: AL TIELEMANS [5]

Beginning with their next possession, it was clear that Brady was targeting anyone matched up with Tharold Simon, Lane's replacement. Edelman would get his shot later. But the game's first points came when Brady found Brandon LaFell on a slant route, with safety Earl Thomas crashing into Simon as LaFell crossed the goal line.

JERMAINE KEARSE IS discussing his friend's frustrations, and he can't stop giggling. Subsequent film reviews confirmed Doug Baldwin's feelings: He was open, often, sometimes even absurdly so. Kearse says Baldwin has saved clips of this on his iPhone. "Guarantee it's in his favorites," Kearse says. He's giggling again. "I mean, Doug was open a lot. Just ask him."

"I was murdering him," Baldwin says of Patriots cornerback Darrelle Revis, who spent most of the game shadowing the veteran receiver. That Baldwin wouldn't get a target until late in the third quarter, even as Seattle struggled to move the ball early in the game, was one harbinger of the team's coming discord.

Fortunately for Seattle, Chris Matthews went off. Unknown until he recovered an onside kick during the Seahawks' comeback win over the Packers in the NFC title game, the 6' 5" Matthews grabbed a jump ball for a 44-yard catch in the second quarter, his first NFL reception outside the preseason. It set up a Lynch touchdown to get the Seahawks on the scoreboard. Then Matthews finished a frantic 30-second drive at the end of the first half with an 11-yard TD grab. He won downfield again on the third play of the third quarter for a 45-yard pickup to set up a tie-breaking field goal. New England coach Bill Belichick and his staff scrambled to solve a problem in the form of a CFL castoff whom the Seahawks had invited for a tryout the previous winter. The Patriots' solution—a

ROBERT BECK

heavy dose of 6' 4" cornerback Brandon Browner—worked, but the Super Bowl's Cinderella story had seemingly been found.

BRYAN STORK SOAKED in all the details of his first Super Bowl. He remembers the utmost respect that Belichick and the coaching staff had for the Seahawks' defense, particularly a group of defensive backs known to most as the Legion of Boom but referred to in the Patriots' building as The Seattle Six. He remembers the deep concern for defensive end Michael Bennett's game-wrecking ability, the "zone-beater" routes New England had prepared to counter the Seahawks' famed Cover 3 defense and the team's surprise when Seattle coach Pete Carroll and defensive coordinator Dan Quinn opened the game leaning heavily into man coverage. Stork even remembers the grass on the University of Phoenix Stadium field was a darker green; he can still picture the stains it left on his cleats.

A rookie center and fourth-round draft pick in 2014, Stork had won a national title at Florida State one season earlier and thus had a chance to become the fifth player to win back-to-back championships at the college and NFL levels. First, he needed to get on the field. He sprained his right MCL in New England's divisional-round win over the Ravens—it didn't require surgery, but it kept him out of the AFC title game. He practically lived in the trainer's room, doing anything possible to speed up the healing of his ailing leg. One morning he bumped into Brady. "Remember: This is your f---ing Super Bowl." Stork made it onto the field, playing all 74 of the Patriots' offensive snaps, and late in the game he provided a crucial, unseen contribution on the unit's most important play.

Trailing by three in the fourth quarter, the Patriots faced a second-and-goal from the Seattle 3 as the clock ticked toward the two-minute warning. The play call—Spin X Return, according to Edelman—was one the Patriots had added to the game plan the night before kickoff. The call itself was good, but Stork noticed a problem: The protection Brady set was wrong. It didn't account for an extra defensive back the Seahawks had lurking in the box. The rookie, with the outcome of the Super Bowl hanging in the balance, overruled the legend—it's the first and only time that season that Stork recalls changing a protection scheme. Brady lined up under center and, at the snap, the Seahawks sent seven pass rushers. All of them were accounted for.

BAD BREAK

Lane's fall (opposite) led to a broken arm and a game-altering lineup change, though Lynch's touchdown (near) tied the game soon after.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

As for Edelman, he knew the Patriots hadn't run this particular play in a single practice. But he also knew the play's intention, because he was there when Brady and offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels concocted it to take advantage of Edelman's quickness against Seattle's forest of tall defensive backs. Edelman, lined up wide left, almost couldn't believe the setup: He was in single coverage, with the 6' 2" Simon defending him. At the snap he moved right, then cut back left into wide open space on the outside. Touchdown. The Patriots led, 28–24, with 2:02 remaining. Edelman began to think ahead, to another drive, because 122 seconds felt like an eternity.

LYNCH COULDN'T BELIEVE the play call. No, not that one; this was six plays earlier. After a touchback, the Seahawks' hopes for a game-winning drive started 80 yards away from the end zone. With an automatic clock stoppage at the two-minute warning two seconds away (plus three timeouts remaining), the entire playbook was available for offensive coordinator Darrell Bevell. He sent a one-word play call, named for Lynch's home city and designed for the star back to deliver a big play in an unexpected way.

Lynch says the Seahawks had "Oakland" ready for several weeks. They lined up with an empty backfield, Lynch the widest receiver on the formation's left side. Even when split wide, a running back will typically run a short route—the play design depended on the Patriots anticipating that. With do-it-all linebacker Jamie Collins following Lynch out wide, indicating man coverage, Lynch says the Seahawks had the look they wanted. Russell Wilson took the shotgun snap, and Lynch took a couple of choppy steps, turning inside to run a slant as Ricardo Lockette, aligned in the left slot, headed upfield on a clear-out route.

As soon as Collins took a hard step to play the slant, Lynch executed a sluggo route—the abbreviated jargon for a "slant and go"—driving off his right foot and cutting back outside Collins, heading up the left sideline. Wilson's throw connected with him 20 yards upfield.

"At that time of the game, that was the last thing that I was expecting to pop off," Lynch says.

Collins, then one of the league's most athletic linebackers, caught up soon after, dragging Lynch down, but not until the ball was on the other side of midfield. Soon, however, the final drive's surprising opening play would be overshadowed, twice.

KEARSE IS READY to watch the catch. It's the one that so many strangers tell him has been lost to Super Bowl history, though he doesn't think that's necessarily true (they're asking him about it, aren't they?).

On a first-and-10 at New England's 38, with 1:14 left, Kearse got what he was expecting: man coverage from Butler, who had followed him that night. He flew up the right sideline on an Inside Go route. "It all happened so fast," he says. Wilson lofted a high spiral. *Short*, Kearse thought, as he tracked the flight and slowed down ever so slightly around the 15-yard line. As the ball descended he fell backward, entangled with Butler. Butler deflected it as they fell. "It's broken up again," began play-by-play man Al Michaels, who then paused for a beat, "and, is it? . . . But, somehow—*did he wind up with the football?!*" With Kearse spinning on his backside, legs splayed in the air like a breakdancer, the ball had deflected off Butler's hand, then off Kearse's left knee. He batted it back into the air with his right hand, batted it a second time, then corralled it as he spun to a stop, hopping to his feet. It was also the first time Butler saved the Super Bowl. He scampered to his feet immediately, forcing Kearse out of bounds at the 5-yard line.

"And then we run a Weak," Lynch says of the next play, a run up the middle to the weak side of the defense. "And, s---, I probably should have gotten in." Instead, linebacker Dont'a Hightower caught Lynch's foot, tripping him up a yard short of the goal line.

"I'VE GOT 3,000 POUNDS OF FLESH UP TO THE RIGHT-HAND SIDE OF THE DEFENSE," PATRICIA SAID YEARS LATER. **"THEY'RE NOT GOING TO RUN LYNCH RIGHT INTO THAT."**

SNAP JUDGMENTS

Stork, the Patriots' rookie center, made it back from a knee injury and overruled Brady on one of the crucial calls of Super Bowl XLIX.

AT THE BEGINNING of that season, the 15th of Tom Brady's career, he was not known as the GOAT or for his recovery pajamas or avocado ice cream habit.

Throughout training camp that season, his mind kept returning to the same word: *perspective*. He won three titles in his first four years as a starter. But his most recent Super Bowl appearances were losses to the Giants, the 2008 and '12 seasons. New England's last title was won by the '04 team. In August '14 Brady turned 37; pundits and analysts were prepared for the twilight of his career.

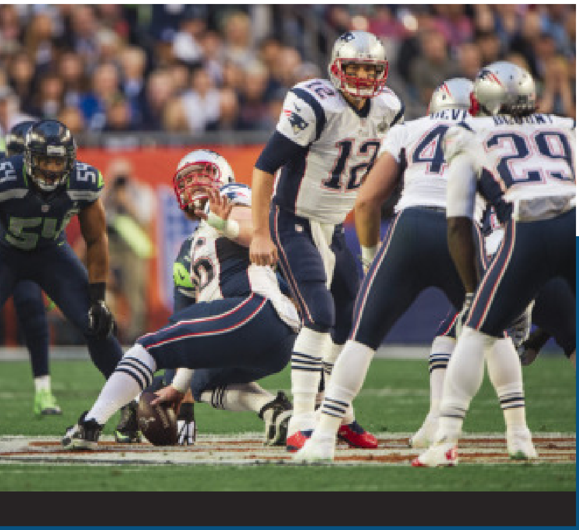
"You realize how hard it is to win one," Brady writes in an email recapping his thoughts on that Super Bowl and the season leading up to it. "And two losses make you appreciate it so much more."

Brady remembers the XLIX postgame, celebrating with his teammates before decamping to his private party, where the mood was more subdued. He sipped a vodka soda surrounded by maybe a dozen friends and family members. He didn't say much. Still, "it was magical," he says.

When he looks back on that season, he remembers the battles. To endure Deflategate, which began with accusations by the Colts following their blowout loss to New England in the AFC championship game. To get to the Super Bowl and to win the game itself. "Win or lose, that will bring you together in ways that not playing in the Super Bowl never would," he says. Edelman agrees and believes that the game helped launch the second chapter of the Patriots' dynasty, resulting in Super Bowl victories two and four years later. "It propelled our generation of Patriots," he says.

The Seahawks, meanwhile, were stunned but never silent. In the post–Super Bowl locker room, Lynch took swigs from a bottle of Hennessy and screamed, “These motherf-----s robbed me!” Carroll didn’t help matters upon the team’s return to Seattle. He gathered the Seahawks for their typical exit meeting. Most of the veterans expected him to assume the kind of accountability he demands from the players, to say the staff made a mistake with that final play call, to admit they should have run the ball. Instead, as one player describes it, “he doubled down.”

After Carroll’s address, some who heard it gathered in small groups to lament the speech. Conspiracy theories surfaced: Did Carroll want to throw so that Wilson would win Super Bowl MVP rather than Lynch? Some Seahawks truly believe that. That game, and the way it ended, still eats at their insides.



ROBERT BECK

Says Lynch: “What we had before was a belief system. The belief system was tarnished after that.

The Seahawks’ core mostly stayed together for the next few seasons, but they failed to advance past the divisional round in 2015 and ’16 and missed the playoffs altogether in ’17. By the ’18 season—the year the Patriots won their sixth and final title with Brady under center—Bennett, Richard Sherman, Lane, Kam Chancellor and Cliff Avril were retired or playing elsewhere. Lynch had signed with his hometown Raiders before the ’17 season, while Kearse joined the Jets. Matthews declined a practice squad demotion in ’15 and was released.

Players from that Patriots team wonder whether a loss would have splintered them in a similar fashion. Would Brady become late-career Brady without the win that broke his Super Bowl drought? New England played in three of the next four Super Bowls, winning two of them. Edelman was there for those three rings, and he credits his current life to that night in Arizona. “Everything,” he says, “started right there.”

In his post-football career as something of a media mogul, Edelman cohosts a podcast with comedian Sam Morril. It’s called *Games With Names*, and its mission is singular: to find the greatest game ever played, across sports. Edelman says he isn’t sure whether XLIX would qualify for the top spot. But he knows who the guest would be on that episode: Lynch, of course.

TWO YEARS AFTER Super Bowl XLIX, at a coaching clinic, Matt Patricia, the Patriots’ defensive coordinator for that game, told New England’s side of the game-defining play.

The Patriots had run out a never-before-seen personnel combination, which surely fed into the confusion on the Seattle sideline and in the huddle. Along with three cornerbacks to match up with the Seahawks’ three receivers, New England had stacked the line with four 300-plus-pound linemen: Vince Wilfork, Sealver Siliga, Alan Branch and Chris Jones.

“Great running back,” Patricia said at the clinic. “We’re going to force [Seattle] to throw. I’ve got 3,000 pounds of flesh up to the right-hand side of the defense, all right? They’re not going to run Lynch right into that.”

Lynch recognizes the appeal of the counterintuitive play call and is aware of the Patriots’ supersized front. He still insists he would have scored, just like he did against New England’s lighter goal-line personnel earlier in the game, just like he did so many times throughout his career.

These days, much of Lynch’s focus is on philanthropic work in Oakland, including youth football. He tells the story of his first game, playing Pop Warner on the offensive line for the Oakland Saints. After a loss, Lynch beelined to his mother, Delisa. “I was so dedicated to this s--- that after the game, I came over to her, and I was crying.” She looked at him sideways. “*Boy*,” Lynch remembers, “*if your ass stop crying, you get to do this s--- again next week*.”

He says, wine-flavored cigar in hand, he believes that lesson is a big reason why, despite the rest of the world’s reaction to the ball he never got, “I probably don’t take it as hard.” □

HOWARD
BISON
SWIMMING &
HOWARD U
HOME
GUEST 1
GUEST 2
LANE
A3
A3

BY
ROBERT SANCHEZ

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
SIMON BRUTY

“NOBODY IN AMERICA CAN OFFER WHAT WE HAVE”

IN A SPORT PLAGUED BY ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION, **HOWARD SWIM COACH NIC**

LONE ALL-BLACK TEAM AND A COMPETITIVE PROGRAM. HE’S ALSO CREATED THE

ASKEW *HAS BUILT NOT ONLY THE NATION'S*

HOTTEST TICKET IN COLLEGE SWIMMING

INSIDE THE HOWARD UNIVERSITY POOL, A COUPLE DOZEN BLOCKS FROM THE U.S. CAPITOL, BOUNCY HIP-HOP BLASTS ACROSS SIX LANES OF OPEN WATER AS HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE BEGIN TO FILTER THROUGH THE METAL DOORS WHERE THEY WILL WITNESS A SINGULAR SIGHT IN COLLEGE SPORTS: AN ENTIRELY BLACK SWIM TEAM.

SWIMMING & DIVING

It's an overcast October afternoon in Washington, D.C., and Howard is an hour from facing its cross-district rival, Georgetown, in the Bison home opener. The crowd around the Burr Gymnasium pool swells: 500, 1,000, 1,200—what likely will be the most-attended dual meet anywhere in the nation this season. Howard fans are already on their feet, chattering, smiling, pointing at dozens of warming-up swimmers flip-turning in the pool below. The DJ spins another track. Screens in the glassed-in Splash Lounge VIP section show a livestream of the meet featuring professional play-by-play and color announcers. The university dance team arrives, clad in all black.

Nic Askew, the program's 44-year-old coach, is standing alongside the pool's wooden seats, thanking well-wishers. It's hard for him not to feel a swell of pride with each handshake and hug and pat on the back as he moves through the crowd. Since taking over this once-moribund program eight years ago, the former Howard swimmer has created arguably the most electric collegiate swimming environment in the U.S. He's pulled recruits from across the country, from Canada and the Caribbean, and developed a team now on the cusp of winning the Northeast Conference title, which would be its first banner in more than 30 years—the nation's only historically Black school with a swim program now showing out in this predominantly white, country club sport.

As a mid-major, Howard may never be on the level of powerhouse NCAA swim factories like Stanford, Texas and Virginia, where success is measured in national championships. Yet the Bison's achievement feels more significant for the beacon the program is becoming within a sport that's traditionally failed to reach Black athletes. While college swim attendance even at the most dominant programs is often measured by the number of parents who show up, Howard these days routinely packs its stands with students, university staff and other locals. On this afternoon, the Bisonette dance team will perform poolside; the DJ will pump his music. Fans will blow horns and cheer and chant. The meet will end with 100 swimmers from each of the teams lining their respective sides of the pool and celebrating the 2022–23 Howard squad's signature addition to the traditional handshake line: dancing to Fast Life Yungstaz's "Swag Surfin'."

"Nobody in America can offer what we have in our pool," Askew says as he gets another handshake. "Where else are you going to see this?" It's a rhetorical question, of course. There is no swim team in the U.S. like the one at Howard, a 155-year-old institution that produces Black doctors, lawyers, engineers, nurses, architects, journalists, musicians and actors, and now is seeing its potential—and sudden influence—in a place hardly anyone could have imagined.

POOL PARTY

College meets are often family affairs. Bringing in a DJ was part of Askew's plan to change that.

TWO WEEKS LATER, on a Saturday morning, 50 Howard swimmers are on their backs atop the gymnasium's basketball court, stretched out with the team's yoga instructor. Much of campus hasn't yet croaked awake from Friday night's parties, but the swim team is already in its first hour of work before two more in the pool.

Askew is leaning against a wall, talking to Salim King, one of his assistants. Their men and women both lost the dual to Georgetown (the men by a painfully slim two points), but the coaches were impressed by the men's team's dominant relays and by the performance of Howard's best swimmer, Miles Simon, a senior from Atlanta and a U.S. Olympic Trials qualifier whom they think will reach the NCAA championships in March. There's no disappointment this morning in the gym, only acknowledgement that the team will have to work harder, push itself a little more.

"New day," Askew says to King.

"For sure."

Askew is a font of positivity, a never-ending seeker of the good that's just around the corner. It's an attitude that dates to his time two decades ago as a record-setting swimmer and all-conference tennis player at Howard. "He always wants to know what's next," says King, Askew's former teammate, who once starred as a distance freestyler. "And he's bringing you with him." Askew often talks about overflowing cups, about using his cup to fill others', about the big idea he has for the Bison pool, about the team's schedule, about winning, about the idea that America's only all-Black

D.C. HEROES

Simon (top) qualified for the U.S. Olympic Trials; Zuzu Nwaeze (below) has also starred, breaking Howard's record in the 1,000-meter free.

college swim team could become a touchstone for underserved communities across the country.

"This is about our mission as a university and the message we want to send as an HBCU," says Askew, who began swimming competitively as a 7-year-old in North Carolina. "This isn't a bunch of Black people in a pool; it's young Black men and women succeeding in a sport that, for years, has shut them out of this experience."

That includes other HBCUs, which have cut programs over the past several decades, leaving Howard as the sole survivor. At the time Askew took over in D.C., there were just three swim programs left among historically Black schools in the U.S. By the end of Askew's second season as coach, it was just Howard.

The coach and his staff make sure each of the school's swimmers learns the history of swimming among Black people. "There's a social element that's emphasized in every part of what we do as a school, and our swim program fits that larger goal," says Howard president Wayne A.I. Frederick. The school requires its 9,000-or-so undergraduate students to pass a basic swim test before earning their degrees. "It's about going into the wider world, seeing inequities and closing them down," Frederick says.

Howard's swimmers know that European conquerors in the 15th century found thriving swimming cultures in West African coastal villages, that chattel slavery in the New World slowly robbed an entire race of its connection to water, that the Jim Crow South—and racism in the North—later prevented Black access to pools across the U.S., and that Black Americans today are 5.5 times more likely to drown than white ones.

"We were naturally in the water, and then that was taken from us," says Miriam Lynch, a Howard volunteer assistant who swam with the women's team from 1999 to 2004 and now is the executive director of Diversity in Aquatics, a Virginia-based organization that works to eliminate barriers to water sports in marginalized communities. "Our team is on the front line of change."

USA Swimming estimates that less than 1.5% of the country's 295,078 competitive swimmers are Black. Within the college ranks, at all levels, that number is just 2%. Askew does the math annually: Roughly one-third of America's Black college swimmers are on Howard's campus—which also means there's a good chance that, every year, dozens of college swim coaches never speak to a single Black swimmer.

The coach stares out at the 50 bodies reaching through yoga poses on the gymnasium floor. "How many of these kids would have continued swimming in college if it weren't for Howard?" he asks. "How many of them would have felt the same kind of support they have here?"

He thinks about the lost scholarship opportunities for young Black people who aren't in this room, about lost chances to get into a good school and find a path to a great future. "How are you going to get a Black boy or girl interested in your sport when they don't see a future for themselves, because no one looks like them?" the coach asks. "That's not offering representation; that's not expanding this sport. That's shutting out an entire group of people."

IT WASN'T THAT long ago that Howard, too, seemed to be closing the door on Black swimming. Before Askew took over in 2014, the Bison men's team had lost every dual meet for nearly 15 years straight—a streak that began during Askew's time on the team. Swimmers sometimes were hungover at practice, if they showed up at all. One time, the school forgot to schedule transportation to pick up the team for a meet. “It was like swimming had become a joke,” says King, who still holds Howard’s record in the 1,650-yard freestyle.

Following another disastrous season, in 2013, Askew was among the most vocal swim alumni advocating for the school to kill the program. “The team didn’t embody Howard’s values,” says Askew. He had joined Howard’s tennis coaching staff as a volunteer assistant after graduating in ’01 while also coaching other programs locally (he became the tennis head coach in ’19). He worried about the embarrassment the swim program was causing the rest of the school and its other athletic programs, how the consistent failure ran counter to everything the university stood for. “If you lose every time you compete, what’s the message you’re sending?” Askew asks. “Are you helping Black swimmers, or are you making it even more difficult for them to be taken seriously?”

But Howard administrators didn’t kill the program. As Askew tells it, the former athletic director approached him one day in 2013, mentioned that he’d seen Askew’s name on Howard’s swim record board and wondered whether he wanted to take over the program. Askew said no at first. But when Howard asked again a year later—this time with a strengthened offer—he said yes. If anybody could turn around Bison swimming, Askew thought, it was him.

“THIS ISN’T A BUNCH OF BLACK PEOPLE IN A POOL; IT’S YOUNG BLACK MEN AND WOMEN SUCCEEDING IN **A SPORT THAT HAS SHUT THEM OUT,”** *ASKEW SAYS.*

At the time of Askew’s hire, the Burr Gymnasium pool was affectionately known as The Dungeon. Drab, gray walls surrounded the pool deck. The stands up top were painted a fading baby blue.

The coach immediately began hitting up swimming alumni for donations. He bought some paint and hired professionals to get to work. Howard’s team was on a new track, and now Askew wanted to make the pool an attraction, one that extended beyond the cloistered swim community to the rest of D.C. The deck walls turned gleaming white. Seats were painted dark blue, except in a small section just above the starters blocks. Those were red—a little setoff for school dignitaries and other VIPs who might want to stop by. Because Askew had big plans.

He hired a DJ to hype up the crowd. He brought in the dancers. He moved his team to the side of the pool deck opposite the seats, which had less room for his swimmers but gave Howard parents and students a better view of the home team.

Progress was slow, but real: The men snapped their dual-meet loss streak during Askew’s second season, in January 2016. The following year, the men’s team won five meets and the women won four; the season after that, the women added another win to their total while the men went 8–4. A few dozen fans turned into 100. Soon, the team was regularly getting 500 people at meets against schools like Virginia Military Institute and Mount St. Mary’s of Maryland. (For reference, at a dual meet between top programs Virginia and Texas this season, the Longhorns’ 2,600-seat pool in Austin was about a third full.) “Nic has elevated swimming, in terms of our community’s consciousness,” says Frederick, the Howard president, who regularly brings his two sons to meets and signed the pair up for a summer swim league. “He’s brought fun and school pride to this program. Our university motto is “truth and service,” and part of that mission is building a community. It’s recognizing excellence in one another and celebrating that. Nic celebrates.”

Dual-meet wins have continued to roll in. The men’s team recorded a second-place finish at the Northeast Conference championships in 2022—its highest in 30 years. More than 60 school swim records so far have fallen during Askew’s tenure, including Howard’s oldest, in the women’s 1,000-yard freestyle, which a pair of freshmen each reset this past October.

All the while, Askew has led a learn-to-swim program at the university pool. He also has joined with local organizations like D.C. Parks and Recreation and the local YMCA to offer swim clinics and helped push for regular meets against Georgetown, which Askew sees as a way to broaden swimming's reach across the city. "You hear Nic talk about our sport, and his ideas for his program, and you immediately want to jump in and help," says Jack Leavitt, Georgetown's coach. "He's competitive, he's passionate, he has a mission, he's completely selfless. He's exactly the person swimming needs right now."

THIS PAST YEAR has been the best of Askew's coaching life. Last February, Howard was named the Northeast Conference's swim coaching staff of the year. A few months later, he won the National Collegiate Scholastic Trophy, a major honor in swimming circles, in large part because it's given by peers to the coach who has provided "the greatest contribution to swimming as a competitive sport." Previous winners include former U.S. national team coaches, national champions and Olympic champions, the inventor of the butterfly stroke and a Presidential Medal of Freedom winner.

Askew was asked to speak at the ceremony, in Rosemont, Ill., and there he thanked his wife and his coaching staff and everyone who'd supported his program during its long, slow climb. A head coach doesn't do it alone, he said. Askew also underscored the fact that he was the only Black head coach in the room, that his team rosters one out of every three Black college swimmers in America, that historically Black schools needed to step up and find a way to put programs back on their campuses, that the rest of the coaches in the room needed to do better at recruiting Black swimmers to their own programs.

"I stand before you as a Black man in America, in a sport that doesn't look like me," he told the coaches. "To me, this drives home the reason that I am at Howard, and I have been called to this sport . . . to lead the only HBCU swimming and diving program, because that shouldn't be the case. This world and this nation are full of opportunities, and opportunities should be for everyone."

After he collected his award, Askew headed home. He got back to work. Over the summer, he drew up

BUFFALO WINS

Askew (third from left) urged on his swimmers in an October meet against Mount St. Mary's. Once chronic losers, the Bison triumphed easily.

& DIVING
BISON

practice sets, scouted possible recruits and put the last touches on the 2022–23 swim schedule, which would start with the Potomac Relays, in D.C., and end with the conference championships in February.

There were also the matters of fundraising, pool improvements and salaries—the never-ending budgetary dance for coaches in nonrevenue sports. Askew's team costs the school roughly $100,000 each year—not including scholarships and coach salaries—a small but not inconsequential sum.

On a walk across the pool deck before practice this past fall, Askew was too busy to think much beyond the next couple of weeks. His team had a full schedule, including a big tune-up meet before winter break, where he'd get his first real gauge of how the team was responding to its training. This was the tempo-setting part of the season, getting swimmers to believe in themselves and their abilities, bumping confidence up before attempting to squeeze more out of them at the conference championships in Ohio.

During the Georgetown meet, Askew unveiled a conference-championship banner for the 1989 men's team. It hung above the starters blocks at one end of the pool. Askew thought it offered a sense of renewal for the program, an acknowledgement that champion swimmers had once called this place home and would do so again. He also was sending a not-so-subtle message to this year's team, a reminder of how terribly their men's and women's programs had performed in the decades that followed. Every time Askew's swimmers step up to race these days, they do so under the shadow of that banner. "Coach is definitely saying something to us," says Simon, the standout senior captain. "He's always getting a point across."

The Salerno family, Professor Mich
'78 & family, & the 2012

As the morning light filtered through a line of windows above the pool, Askew stood on the deck and admired the banner for a moment. He pointed at the white walls that surrounded the pool. The paint had been among the first signs that things were changing at Howard, a visual marker that Bison swimming was creating a future, and not just for itself. Askew traced an index finger down to the spot where the wall met the tiled floor. The bottom six inches were still the old, drab gray that had been here when he took over—the remnant of a once-failing program. The line ran the entire perimeter of the pool's deck.

It was another one of Askew's motivators, but this one was just for him. To anyone else, that gray line was an almost imperceptible mark. For Askew, it was a measure of how far his team had come in these eight years. It was also a warning about the precariousness of his situation, the ease with which the program could again slide into obscurity.

Askew pointed at the line. "That, right there?" he said. "We will never go back to that."

A few minutes later, swimmers were filling the deck. The men and women spread out across the blocks as Askew pulled a pair of stopwatches around his neck. Eight swims were written in black marker on a window overlooking the pool, 50- and 100-yard sprints that encompassed all four strokes—back, breast, fly, free. Swimmers' initials were written along the top, with room for the times they'd log this morning.

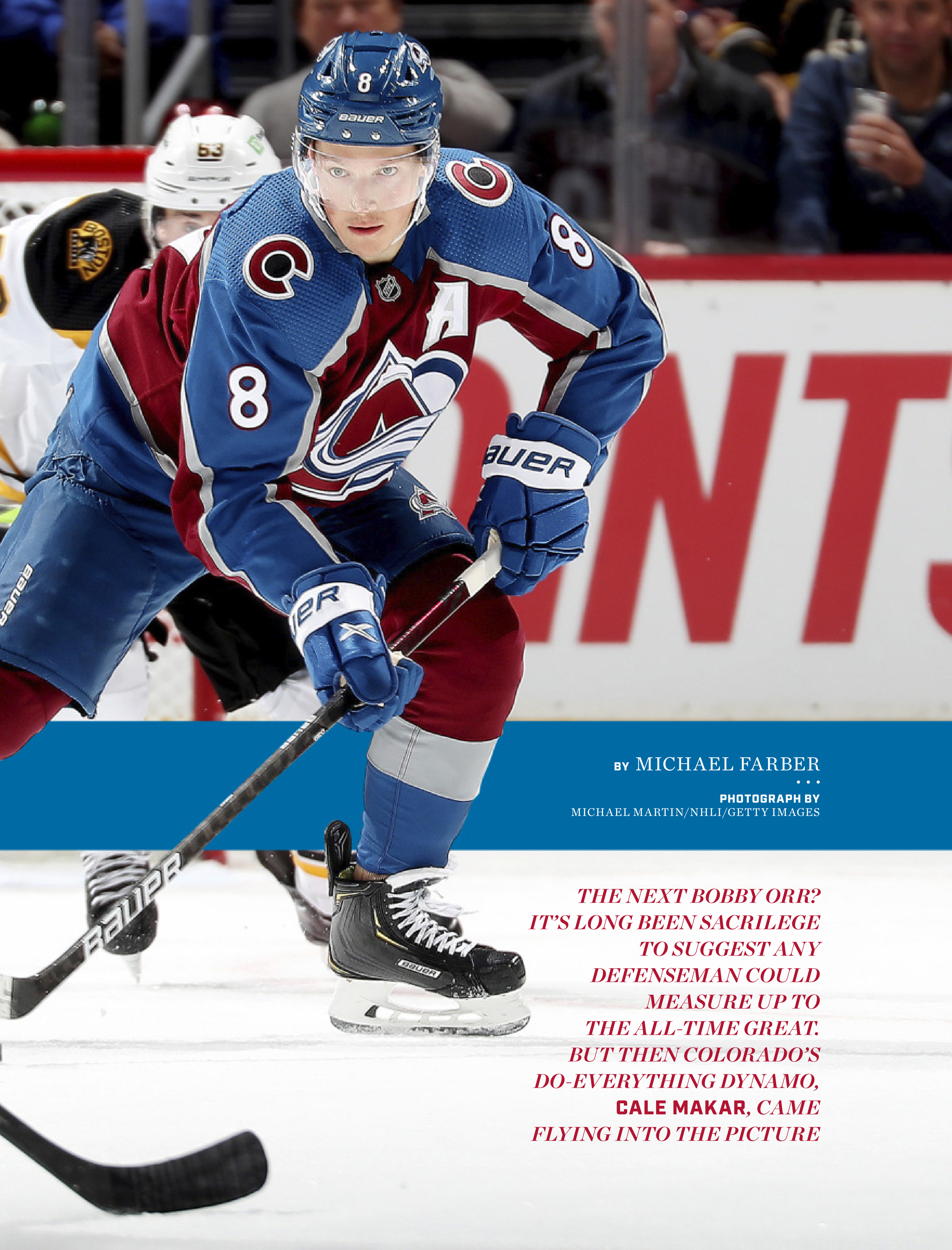
It was part of what Askew calls "positive pressure." It's the idea that everyone must perform every time, that the rest of the team will always know who's striving and who's falling short.

As the first swimmers got into their crouches on the block, the coach watched from a lifeguard stand. There was a whistle, and the swimmers were off. There were streamlines and explosive kicks and clean strokes. Calm water suddenly churned. Six flip turns and more white water. Askew leaned forward in his chair and pushed the stopwatch buttons as hands touched the wall. He wrote down the times.

"There's no hiding here," he said. □

McAVOY
73
WARRIOR

All Hail Cale



BY MICHAEL FARBER

• • •

PHOTOGRAPH BY
MICHAEL MARTIN/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES

THE NEXT BOBBY ORR? IT'S LONG BEEN SACRILEGE TO SUGGEST ANY DEFENSEMAN COULD MEASURE UP TO THE ALL-TIME GREAT. BUT THEN COLORADO'S DO-EVERYTHING DYNAMO, **CALE MAKAR**, *CAME FLYING INTO THE PICTURE*

LIKE ANY OTHER SOCIETY, THE NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE IS AWASH IN RITUAL, OFFERING THE PLEASURE OF SMALL THINGS AND A BOND THAT STRETCHES OVER TEAMS AND TIME.

Consider the Stanley Cup handoff, which began in the 1990s, an intricate bit of business. This crowning moment, when each member of the winning squad gets his turn hoisting the trophy, deserves more than hey-you-take-it randomness, but plotting the celebratory path through the team is impractical and bad juju. Like a union shop, seniority is the overriding guideline, although the order can be tweaked to account for sentimentality.

"It's nothing you ever want to talk about during the playoffs," Avalanche captain Gabriel Landeskog says. "I told [defenseman Erik Johnson] years ago, when we were going through the tough times, that one day we were going to win it, and I was going to give it to him first. But then, after that, it's sorta up to each guy."

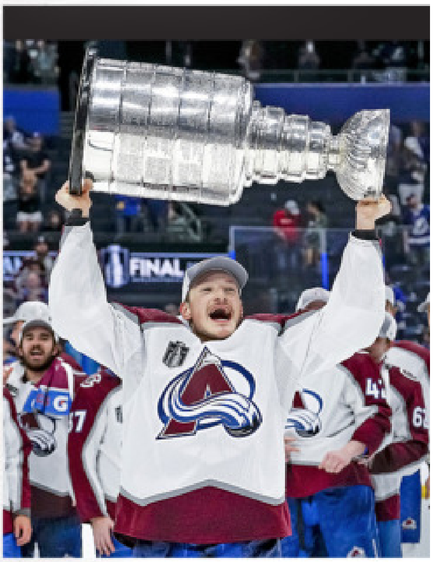
Landeskog accepted the Stanley Cup from NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly in Tampa after the Avs dethroned the Lightning last June. Landeskog hoisted its 35 pounds and passed it to Johnson. Johnson gave it to 35-year-old Andrew Cogliano, who had been traded to Colorado three months earlier. Then Nathan MacKinnon . . . Jack Johnson . . . Nazem Kadri . . . Andre Burakovsky . . . the cast of *This Is Us* . . . a friendly TSA agent at Denver International Airport . . . Lily from AT&T . . . and, belatedly, Cale Makar. He was 14th.

Not that Makar minded. Or noticed, really. Just six days earlier, the then 23-year-old had won the

HARRY HOW/GETTY IMAGES

HEAVY LIFTING

Makar bagged the Norris Trophy, the Conn Smythe and, of course, the Stanley Cup last season.



ANDREW BERSHAW/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

Norris Trophy as the NHL's best defenseman. And six or so minutes earlier he had been awarded the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP.

"In that moment I was just so happy seeing the guys lift it," Makar says. "Whenever my turn came, I was going to enjoy it. I could've been last and I wouldn't have cared."

"*Fourteenth?*" Landeskog asks. "No idea. I kinda got sidetracked. But the Conn Smythe [winner] should be getting it earlier. Let's have that on record."

Makar started the playoffs with 10 points in four games, including the Game 2 OT winner, as he outplayed Norris Trophy rival Roman Josi in the Avs' sweep of the Predators. "Whenever Makar's on the ice," Nashville GM David Poile says, "he's the only guy I watch."

In the firewagon Western Conference final against the Oilers, Makar had nine points, sweeping the McSeries against Connor McDavid. He had another seven in the Cup final, finishing with 29 in 20 postseason games. In his third full NHL season, Makar did not reimagine hockey—crisp zone entries and exits, smooth orchestration on the power play and physical defending always have been part of the job description—but the way he commanded the ice was something deeper and richer, as if he had unearthed shards of a hockey relic.

The NHL has waited almost half a century for another Bobby Orr. Makar found him. In the mirror.

IN THE SPRING of 2017, Devils GM Ray Shero convened a predraft meeting. New Jersey had won the lottery for the first pick, leapfrogging the last-place Avs, and now Shero asked the executives and scouts around the table to stand, name their choice and then—because a sports exec can no more resist a take than a talk-show caller—state which player he most resembled.

As Jan Ludvig, then a western amateur scout for the Devils, recalls, the principal names Ping-Ponging around the room were Nico Hischier, a Swiss center from the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League; and Miro Heiskanen, a Finnish defenseman. Now it was Ludvig's turn.

"Cale Makar."

Ludvig, a scout for more than a quarter of a century, had been smitten by the defenseman, who stood maybe 5' 9", weighed 160 pounds after a seven-course meal and was ranked ninth among North American skaters by NHL Central Scouting. Ludvig had watched Makar five or so times during the Brooks Bandits' regular season and checked back during the playoffs. He planned to stay for two games and beat it out of Brooks, a pungent (if the wind is blowing the wrong way) meat-processing town two hours southeast of Calgary. Instead he stayed for two rounds. "The tangibles were obvious, but I had to find something wrong with his game," Ludvig says. "The harder I looked, the less wrong I could find. The way he felt the game. The way he processed the game. The body positioning. The angling. Half his body seemed to go one way, half the other, like Roger Federer hitting a forehand while his body's already drifting to hit a backhand."

The caveat: Makar was the big fish in a small, artificially frozen pond, with 1,700 seats and room for 500 standing. He was dominating the Alberta Junior Hockey League. The AJ. The Tier II league, often a stepping stone to the NCAA, has produced just two first-round picks: Joe Colborne, No. 16 to the Bruins in 2008, and Dylan Olsen, No. 28 to the Blackhawks the next year. These two had middling NHL careers, a combined 419 games. By the '17 draft, both were out of the league.

"The comp: a right-handed Bobby Orr."

Ludvig might as well have said "a right-handed Babe the Blue Ox." Since Wayne Gretzky, there has been a clamoring for The Next One. Mario Lemieux. Eric Lindros. Sidney Crosby. McDavid. Centers, all.

Defensemen are different, right? Mastery of the position takes time, wisdom. Nick Lidstrom didn't win the first of his seven Norris Trophies until he was in his 30s. While eye-catching offensive seasons might invite some ooh-ing and Orr-ing—Paul Coffey, Erik Karlsson—there never has been a prefab, out-of-the-box 18-year-old No. 4. If a scout dared invoke Orr's name, he was being wishful, foolish or extravagant.

Ludvig had seen Orr play only once as a kid, on TV, watching the 1976 Canada Cup with his father on a snowy black-and-white screen back in Czechoslovakia. "Orr was a mythical creature," Ludvig says. "How do you compare anything to a mythical creature?"

He knew that winning over the room at that predraft meeting would not be easy. "Chances are, our bosses out east and the regional scouts didn't know much about [Makar], so I was going to be dramatic." Ludvig was not laughed out, but he didn't sway anyone, either. The Devils selected Hischier; the Avs chose Makar fourth—"I won't tell you where he was on our board, but I will say we had Cale very, very high," GM Chris McFarland says—and five years later audacity has morphed into conventional wisdom.

Gretzky established the baseline on a TNT postgame show after the Avalanche-Oilers series, calling Makar the closest player to Orr for his impact offensively and defensively. "I'll never say someone's as good as Bobby Orr," Gretzky says now. "Orr was so good defensively. Also, tough as nails. He'd fight guys." (Orr had 47 career fights, according to Hockeyfights.com. Makar has had zero.) "Orr'd also win the scoring race, and do all the things that went with it. But Makar can put up 90 or 100 points, which is a lot. And like Bobby, he'll also be matched against top lines, shutting down the top guy, killing five-on-threes, blocking shots, taking the body. He's a new-era Bobby Orr."

Scotty Bowman, who coached Orr in that 1976 Canada Cup: Makar is "close to [Orr]. Maybe he doesn't have an edge like Orr, but there's no effort to his game. It's a good comparison because of their skating. The edge work. The pivot. The turning."

Poile: "Not Orr, but Orr-esque." Nobody is Orr, but Makar was trying as early as fifth grade in Calgary, when he dressed up as No. 4 for a school project. In the

"MATCHED AGAINST TOP LINES, SHUTTING DOWN THE TOP GUY, KILLING FIVE-ON-THREES, BLOCKING SHOTS." SAYS GRETZKY: **"HE'S A NEW-ERA BOBBY ORR."**

Orr vs. New Orr

How the résumés of Bobby Orr and Cale Makar compare through their first three NHL seasons

NO. 4		NO. 8
174	GAMES	178
45–91	GOALS–ASSISTS	48–132
✓	CALDER TROPHY	✓
✓ ✓	NORRIS TROPHY	✓
✗	STANLEY CUP	✓
✗	PLAYOFF MVP	✓

FROM LEFT: NEIL LEIFER; ERICK W. RASCO

Makar home, Orr was never far away. All you had to do was walk downstairs to the den to see his autographed picture. "I made sure the kids"—Cale and his brother, Taylor, a sophomore forward at UMass—"knew about Bobby Orr," says Gary Makar, their father. "The way he handled himself. The way he innovated on the ice. He bobbed while others weaved. We showed them magazines, books, old videos. Later, YouTube. It left the kids shaking their heads. Tom Lysiak is my cousin"—Lysiak had a 14-year NHL career during the 1970s and '80s—"and we have a video of Orr undressing him."

Makar does those things, too. During overtime in Chicago last January, he circled the net counterclockwise, monitored by a wary Kirby Dach. Makar reached the top of the left circle, near the half boards, and stopped abruptly. "I saw [Dach] on my shoulder, and he was a little bit too high, cheating on the upside, maybe thinking I might bring it up top," Makar says. "I didn't give that fake away. I could have stopped and gone back, but it ended up being a spin." He externally rotated his right foot. He shaved ice to slow himself. He rotated his spine. And then he made a forward crossover to create separation. *Dach*. Rhymes with *pick-up-your-jock*. Makar dangled—forehand, backhand, roof on goalie Marc-André Fleury. Game over.

The only things missing from this unadulterated, unscripted and uncoached six seconds of joyous pond hockey were gathering twilight, frostbitten cheeks and a steaming cup of hot chocolate.

AS THE CENTURY turned and Calgary nestled into its winter coat, Gary Makar and his wife, Laura MacGregor, took their son to a provincial park, near the Elbow River, in the shadow of the Rockies, and turned him loose on Allen Bill Pond. Cale was 2. In the way that some toddlers can color inside the lines and others can solve puzzles, skating was something he could just *do*. There has never been a time he doesn't remember being on skates. They are his living now. They have always been his joy.

"When you put those skates on, nothing else around you really mattered," Makar says. "Any time the skates touched the ice, I was in a different world."

Makar was a Canadian trope. Hockey was personal. The marketing company his father worked for had the Calgary Flames as a client. Bill Hay, the 1960 Calder Trophy winner and later the chairman of the Hockey Hall of Fame, was a family friend. Plus there was Lysiak. And so Makar geeked on the game. He was obsessed with videos of what he calls "old-time hockey."

"You had guys like Orr and Coffey that made it look like they were at a completely different pace," he says. He wanted in.

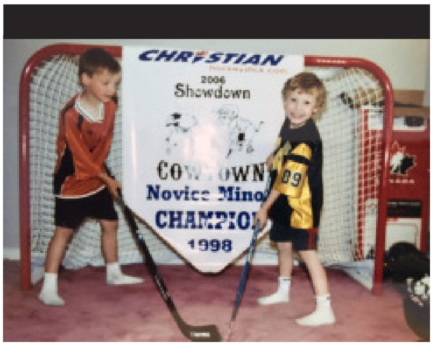
Makar grew up dreaming of being good enough to play in the Western Hockey League, but he was hardly a blue-chip prospect when it was time for its draft; the Medicine Hat Tigers picked him at No. 164 in 2013. Along with others, Hay (the first NCAA graduate to play regularly in the NHL) counseled Makar that college might be the route for him. So at 16 he moved to the Brooks Bandits, a pipeline to U.S. programs.

Makar had visited UMass and other East Coast universities on a summer hockey tour. The campus was lovely. The team was terrible, a Hockey East doormat. But other players from Brooks had gone there, and it just felt *right*. He committed. And he never wavered, not even when the coach who recruited him was fired. Greg Carvel, the new coach, a former assistant with the Ottawa Senators, flew to Alberta to see Makar. Warmups were enough. Before the puck dropped, Carvel phoned an assistant and told him, "We have our Erik Karlsson."

Makar entered UMass in the fall of 2017, months after the NHL draft. His offensive instincts were so blinding that Dominique Ducharme, the coach for

NO KIDDING

Makar (left) and his brother, Taylor, were raised on hockey. Taylor is at UMass now, where Cale (below) previously starred.



FROM TOP: COURTESY OF THE MAKAR FAMILY; RICHARD T GAGNON/GETTY IMAGES

Canada at the 2018 World Junior Championships, tabbed him that winter for his squad, initially as a power-play specialist and the seventh defenseman. Makar managed three goals—two on the power play—and eight points in seven games. He was ninth in tournament scoring as Canada won gold. (A woman has said eight hockey players, at least some of whom were on that Canadian team, sexually assaulted her in June 2018. Makar cooperated with the investigation and reiterates to SPORTS ILLUSTRATED that he was not involved with the alleged incident in any way. The woman filed a $3.5 million lawsuit, which Hockey Canada settled. None of the eight players have been named.)

The Avalanche nudged Makar to turn pro after the season. He demurred. "He knew he wasn't ready," Carvel says. "He was one of our weaker players in the weight room. You can't fast-forward strength and stamina. And he had to learn to be a pro and become more consistent in his practice habits."

Now 5' 11" and 187 pounds, Makar entered his sophomore year almost too cool for school hockey, yet not physically ready for the NHL grind. Dissecting a zone entry during a video session that season, Carvel upbraided his team for not passing to Makar. "Let's get the puck to Cale," Carvel said, "and we know he's going to do something good with it." After that meeting, Makar walked into Carvel's office. "[He's] basically pumping my tires. In my head I'm like: You can't single me out like that; you're putting me on a pedestal," Makar recalls. "The first thing I thought of was *Kicking and Screaming*"—a kids' soccer movie starring Will Ferrell, in which one coach's strategy is simply *Get the ball to the Italians!* "And everyone starts hating [the Italian kids]. So I made it clear: It can't be like that if we're going to win. I'm a pretty quiet guy, so when I do speak, I like to think my words mean something. He really understood and apologized."

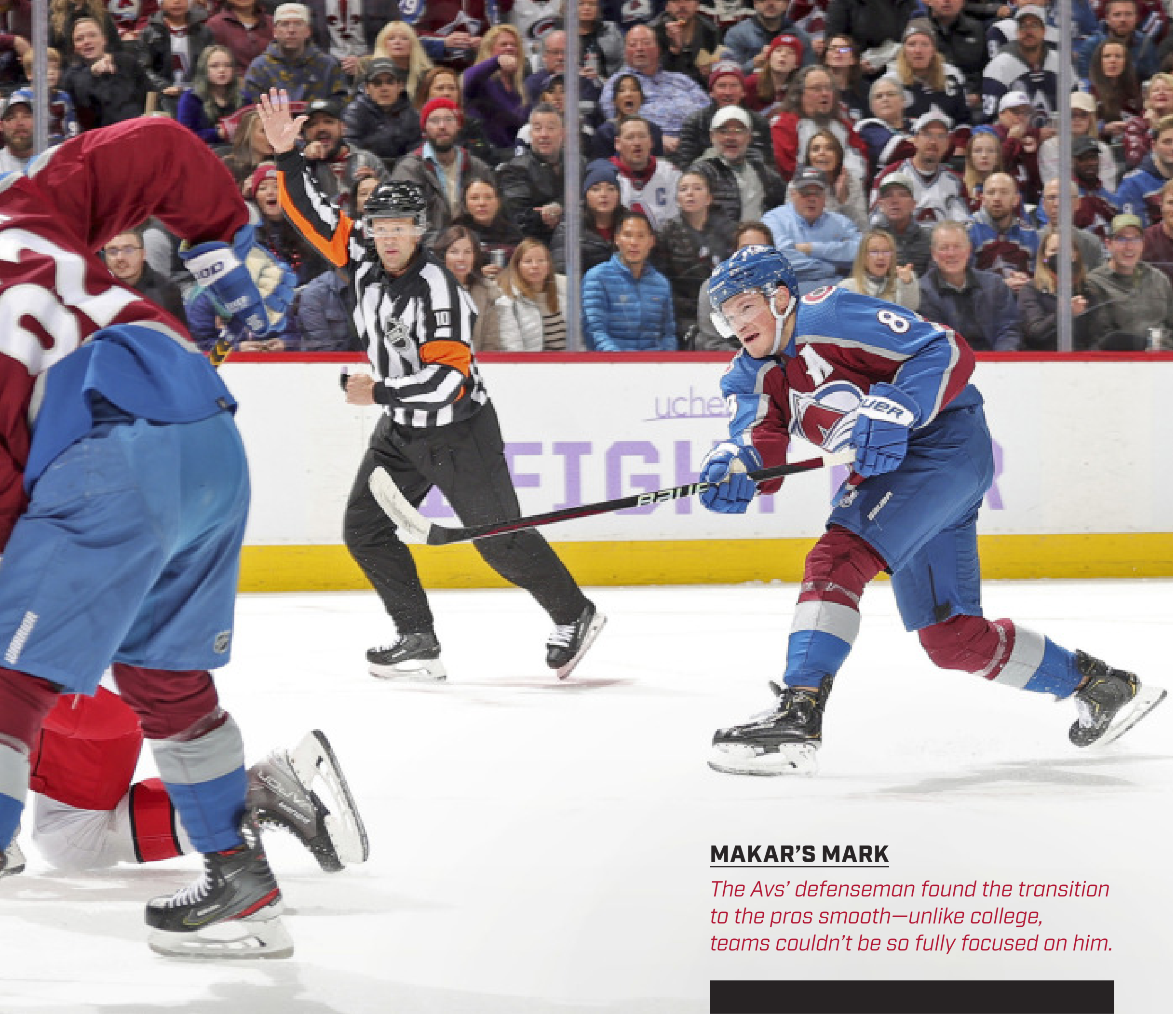
LEHKONEN
KeyBa

MAKAR SAYS HE IS NOT READY TO REST ON HIS ACCOMPLISHMENTS. **"MAYBE IF WE HAVE FIVE MORE CUPS I'LL FEEL LIKE I'VE DONE SOMETHING."**

UMass did win in 2018–19. The Minutemen made the NCAA tournament for the first time in 12 years and reached their first Frozen Four. On Thursday they beat Denver in OT in the semis. On Friday, Makar won the Hobey Baker Award. Late Saturday, after losing the final to Minnesota-Duluth, he signed with the Avalanche. On Monday he was thrust into Game 3 of a first-round series against the Flames, playing 14 minutes.

"[At] the morning skate, you could see how good he was," MacKinnon says. "You never know if college-to-NHL will translate. I thought we knew with him, but you don't really know until you see it."

In that first period, Makar made two exceptional defensive plays, including breaking up an odd-man rush, corralling the puck and sparking a transition, and he scored on his first shot, a wrister through Mike Smith's pads. Makar was the 138th NHL player to make his debut in the playoffs, and he was the first defenseman among them to score.



MAKAR'S MARK

The Avs' defenseman found the transition to the pros smooth—unlike college, teams couldn't be so fully focused on him.

MICHAEL MARTIN/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES

"He called after the first game and said it was actually easier than the Frozen Four," Gary Makar says. "[Minnesota-Duluth] was a bigger, older team, and they were running him all game. Every shift was life and death. Pretty much every game his second year [at UMass], when Cale was sorta The Guy, it was like that. The NHL playoffs, he was just a new guy coming in."

The secret was out by the end of those playoffs, after Makar compiled six points in 10 games. Then Year 1, the Calder. Year 2, runner-up in Norris voting. Last season, the Norris, the Stanley Cup and the Conn Smythe. Orr and Lidstrom are the only others to have completed the D-man hat trick of excellence.

"I see a super intelligent player," Avalanche coach Jared Bednar says. "Defending, he knows what he's looking for from offensive players, when they might expose the puck so he can make a play. So you'll see at times he'll tighten the gap on the rush, slide over backwards, steal the puck and use his edges to cut it up ice. He's charging on the rush while the other team's still trying to play offense. Or he'll come over and just lay someone out with a big, physical check. It keeps offensive players on their toes because you never know which way he's going to come at you."

In short, Orr adjacent.

MAKAR QUICKLY LEARNED of Gretzky's comments, a trickle and then a torrent into his phone. He says he was honored. He calls it humbling. This, of course, is what hockey players say. He shrugs. He knows it's only human to compare. Like ritual, comparison evokes the comforting past.

"Everybody wants to compare because they want to remember something that was so good, or something they loved in the past," Makar says one afternoon at the Avalanche's practice rink.

He continues. "It's almost like I deal with [the Orr comparison] and I *don't* deal with it. That was my third year. I could do nothing for the next 15 [years], and everybody would care less about what I did in the first three. Maybe if we have five more Cups I'll feel like I've done something."

Speak low. Even as he continues at a point-per-game pace, while leading the NHL in ice time and ruling the blue line with offhand elegance, dare you declare that the next Orr truly is here? The future is not timestamped. But at 8:20 a.m. on June 27, nine hours after Makar accepted the Stanley Cup from the backup goaltender, the real Bobby Orr tweeted: "Congratulations @Cmakar8 for a wonderful season! I couldn't be happier for you and all your teammates." □

SO YOU WANT A JOB IN SPORTS?

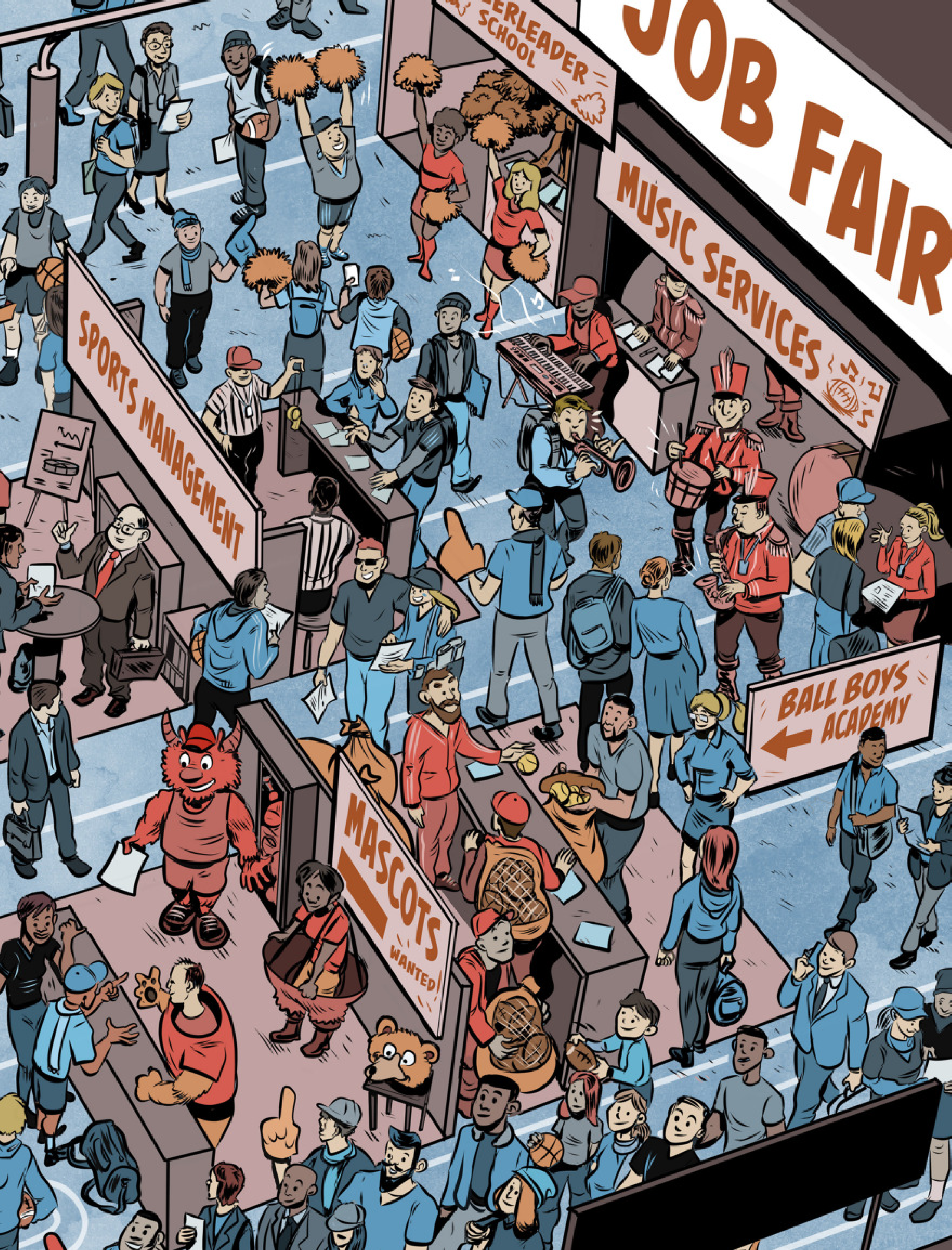
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
RAFA ALVAREZ

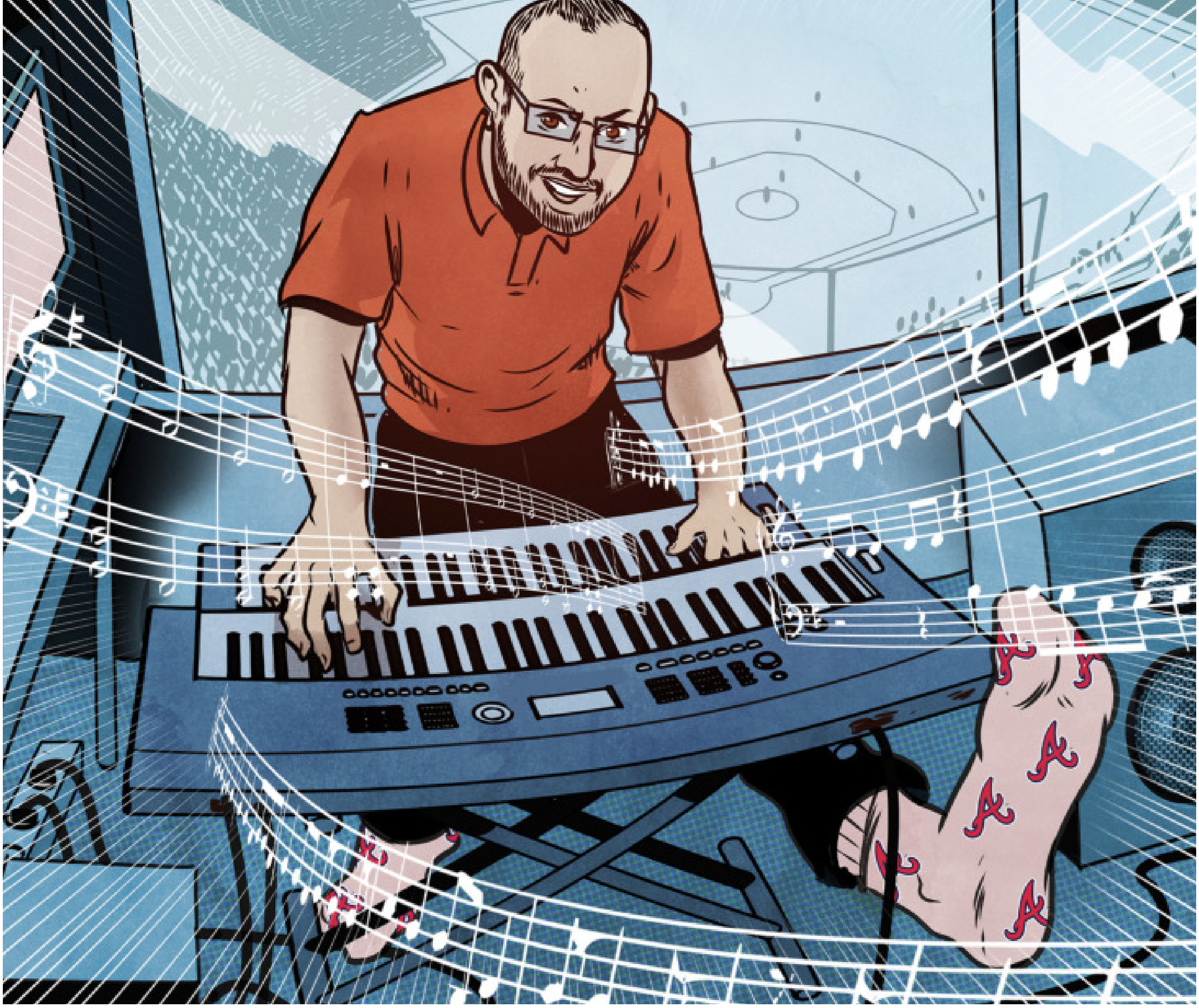
YOUR WIFFLE BALL SLIDEPIECE IS UNHITTABLE. YOU ONCE HIT 13 THREES IN A ROW IN THE DRIVEWAY—IN HIGH WIND! AT THANKSGIVING YOU GOT AUNT GLADYS TO FOLD POCKET KINGS AGAINST THREE-SIX OFF-SUIT JUST BY GIVING HER YOUR "LOOK." LET'S FACE IT, THOUGH, YOU'RE NOT THE NEXT OHTANI.

STEPH CURRY IS NOT QUAKING IN HIS UNDER ARMOURS. YOU WON'T NEED A WORLD SERIES OF POKER BRACELET FITTING. BUT JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT A STAR DOESN'T MEAN YOU CAN'T HAVE A CAREER IN SPORTS.

IT JUST TAKES HARD WORK, SOME LUCK AND MAYBE A DEGREE IN ENGINEERING. OR AT LEAST A DAD WHO LOVES POLKA.

FOOD SERVICES
SPORT BROADCAST


JOB FAIR
ERLEADER SCHOOL
MUSIC SERVICES
SPORTS MANAGEMENT
BALL BOYS ACADEMY
MASCOTS WANTED



Organist

NAME: *MATTHEW KAMINSKI*

EMPLOYER: *ATLANTA BRAVES*

BASEBALL IS CONSTANTLY trying to move forward and lose its stodgy reputation, cramming bells and whistles into the spectator experience. So there's a certain irony to the fact that one of the most entertaining things a fan can do is go to a game in Atlanta and listen to the organist. Matthew Kaminski has been playing for the Braves since 2009. He does all the classics, like "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" and *Da-da-da-dum-da-dum-CHARGE!* But he truly shines when an opposing hitter steps to the plate.

Braves players select their own walkup music, a recording of which is blared from the speakers. Visitors, though, are accompanied by the dulcet tones of Kaminski's Hammond SK2 organ, and he's the one who picks the tunes. And picking them is something he's elevated to an art form. In one three-game series last summer, Chas McCormick of the Astros walked up to "The Brady Bunch" (in honor of Maureen McCormick, aka Marcia Brady), "Sugar and Spice" (h/t to the McCormick spice brand) and "I Got You Babe" (Sonny and Cher's son is named Chaz). Teammate Alex Bregman got "I Am the Walrus," which contains the lyric, "I am the egg man." And Kaminski does more than just name puns. Perhaps his deepest cut is "Invisible Touch," which he plays for the Phillies' Alec Bohm, who controversially scored the winning run against Atlanta in a 2021 game despite failing to touch home plate.

Kaminski's Twitter feed (@Bravesorganist) is filled with people guessing references, and Kaminski replies to correct answers with check marks like a third-grade teacher marking up a spelling test. They also offer suggestions. "At first it was just my wife and me and some coworkers brainstorming what songs I could play," Kaminski, 45, says. "But then when Twitter started, I started crowdsourcing the fans." Some of his more rabid followers can be seen at Truist Park wearing Braves jerseys with his last name and the number 61—one for each key on the organ.

Like so many musicians, Kaminski got his start for a very simple reason: "My parents made me," he says. His dad was a fan of Lawrence Welk, whose polka-based music was heavy on the organ and accordion, which Kaminski also plays. He graduated from Georgia State with a degree in music and has been giving organ lessons since 2000. (He also plays with polka, jazz and rock bands, in addition to releasing records.) In ’09 one of his students connected him with a friend at the Braves, who were looking for a new organist.

During games, Kaminski sits in his perch above the plate near the team’s DJ. The two work together to fill dead time, with the DJ giving Kaminski a cue when he should play something. With fewer teams using live organists, Kaminski points to spontaneity as a reason they’re still essential. “If a guy’s bat slips out of his hand, I like to play ‘Slip Slidin’ Away,’ ” he says. “Or if one of the Braves makes a great jumping play, I’ll play ‘Jump’ by Van Halen.” By the time a DJ would be able to cue up those songs, the moment would be over.

It should also be noted that Kaminski does all this in his socks. He has size 11 ½ feet, and wearing shoes that big makes it hard to properly play the pedals.

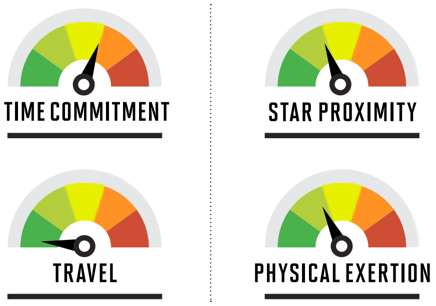
For walkup music, though, he’s totally prepared. Kaminski never crosses the line into mean territory, but his mind can veer into the realm of “lightly mocking.” When I asked him what he would play for me, Mark Bechtel, he said either something by Marky Mark or “Loser” by Beck. (I’m not sure which is worse.)

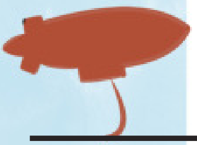
The closest Kaminski has ever gotten to blowback was when Toronto native and noted polite guy Joey Votto of the Reds asked, through Cincinnati’s PR department, that Kaminski stop playing “O Canada,” because Votto didn’t want to cut short his national anthem by stepping into the box.

As for his favorite walkup number, Kaminski surprisingly doesn’t pick something that allows him to show off his musical proficiency. For former infielder Michael Morse, Kaminski explains, “I would play Morse code on the organ. I know that probably went over many people’s heads, except perhaps the military people in the audience.”

The monotone message he tapped out: *dash-dash-dash, dot-dot-dash, dash.*

Translation: O.U.T. —*Mark Bechtel*





Blimp Pilot

NAME: JERRY HISSEM

EMPLOYER: GOODYEAR

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■ **FEW PEOPLE** have been to more major sporting events than Jerry Hissem. Or, we should say, near more major sporting events. For 25 years Hissem has been a blimp pilot, hovering over football games, golf tournaments, baseball games. You name it, Hissem can tell you what it looks like from 2,000 feet up.

After graduating from Ohio State with a degree in aviation, Hissem got a mechanic’s license as a backup plan. That led to a job as a mechanic at Goodyear. He had his flight certificates, though. Within 12 months he applied to be a blimp pilot and was accepted into a pretty elite group: Goodyear employs only a dozen pilots out of 50 or so full-timers worldwide.

At Goodyear, new pilots have experience in helicopters and/or airplanes. They are then trained in-house for six to 12 months before they get their lighter-than-air license.

No one will confuse Hissem and his cohorts with Maverick or Ice Man. The blimp (Goodyear has a fleet of three) tops out at 70 knots, though it usually cruises at around 50. Still, Hissem and his copilot usually beat their support crew—21 people in seven vehicles—to their venue.

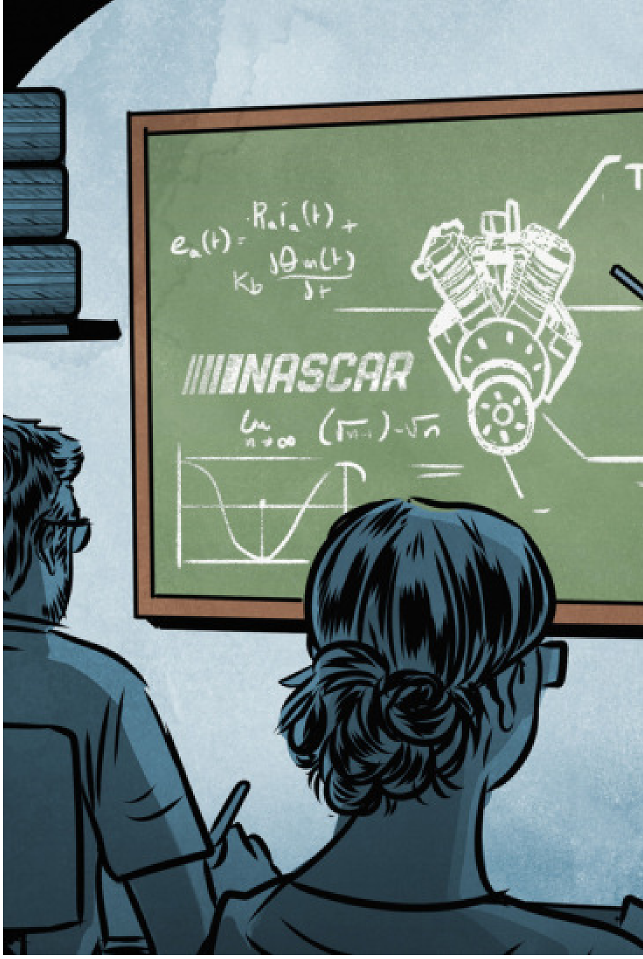
Once there, the pilot’s job is to get his cameraperson a good shot without disturbing the event. “We have to be mindful of the sun angle,” says Hissem. “Behind you is always better. But we also have to be mindful of our shadow. A 246-foot blimp casts a pretty big one.”

Hissem’s vantage point might not be as electric as inside the venue, but he doesn’t mind. He gets to meet fans at his hotel and he has what he considers the best seat in the house. Says Hissem, “We enjoy the people and we enjoy the view from above.” —M.B.

Stock Car Crew Chief

NAME: *CLIFF DANIELS*

EMPLOYER: *HENDRICK MOTORSPORTS*



ONE OF THE most famous and successful crew chiefs in the history of NASCAR was Jake Elder. Nicknamed Suitcase Jake, he dropped out of school in third grade and could barely read or write. His people skills were lacking—he once went after one of his own crew members with a jack handle—but his car knowledge wasn't.

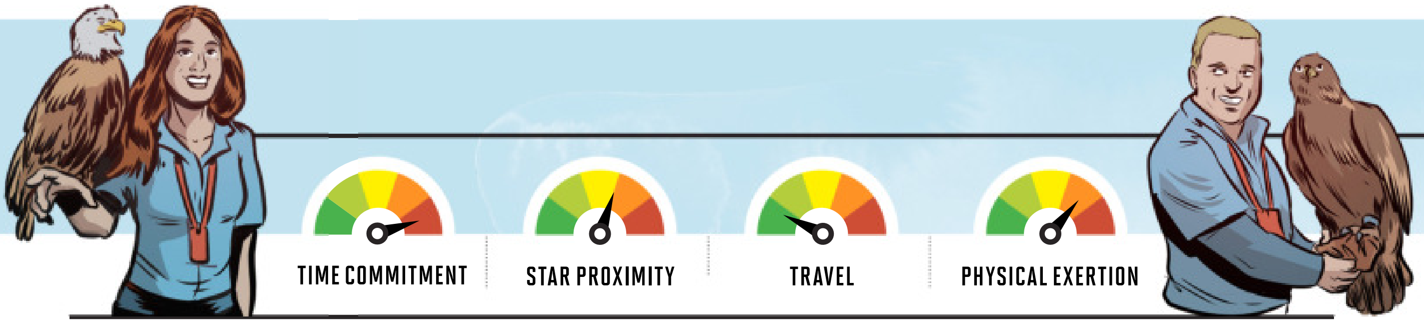
Elder would lug his suitcase from team to team, setting up a car using tape measures adorned with a series of elaborate marking that only he understood. It was unorthodox, but it worked. He won two championships in the 1960s and was the crew chief for the rookie seasons of both Darrell Waltrip and Dale Earnhardt, the latter of whom he told, "Stick with me, and we'll both be wearing diamonds as big as horse turds."

Gone are the days when such methods will get you a job as a crew chief. Teams today are run by engineers, many of whom actually studied the science of stock cars. Case in point: Cliff Daniels, who was on top of the box when Kyle Larson won the 2021 Cup Series championship. Daniels attended UNC Charlotte, where he majored in mechanical engineering with a concentration in motorsports. (He also minored in math.)

Daniels grew up wanting to be a baseball player or a race car driver. He drove on tracks around his home in Virginia, but when he was in college he realized that he didn't have the funds necessary to continue. "When I couldn't spend as much time driving, I had more time to spend in school with all these boring—and I say that with endearment—math classes and science classes," says Daniels. "All of a sudden they became relevant. I could open a textbook, and here is an equation and an explanation on how to design a shock absorber to help a vehicle handle a bump on a road correctly."

Taking classes with names like Road Vehicle Dynamics, he made straight A's as a senior. He got his first job in NASCAR in 2011, and within three years he was at Hendrick Motorsports as the race engineer for seven-time champ Jimmie Johnson. While he was able to apply what he had learned in the classroom, Daniels also leaned on the practical experience from his days as a driver. He's quick to point out that there are plenty of crew chiefs who don't have degrees in motorsports engineering, that his isn't the only path.

"It takes a very comprehensive approach, in all areas," says Daniels. "One is what I would call 'racer savvy'—you know, guys that have been around racing for a long time who can react to a



Mascot Handler

NAMES: *AMANDA SWEENEY*
ANDREW HOPKINS

TEAM: *AUBURN TIGERS*

■ **FOR 70 YEARS** the eagle that served as Auburn's live mascot lived inside an enclosure built by a fraternity. But in 2000 the eagle's care was handed over to the Southeastern Raptor Center.

Assistant director Andrew Hopkins and trainer Amanda Sweeney both started working at the center as student volunteers. Now they work with golden eagle Aurea and bald eagle Independence, who shared flight duties during Auburn's 2022

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changing track condition, a different tire, a different car, a different track—kind of a seat-of-the-pants thing. *I know that when the clouds come over, we need to make X change to the car to help the balance for the driver to make it go faster.*"

In addition to setting up the car and overseeing race strategy, Daniels has some traditional stick-and-ball coaching activities. Every Tuesday he and the crew watch tape of pit stops. "We have cameras on each of the individuals going over the wall, plus overhead cameras and side cameras where you can really break down in slow motion all the detail of the choreography."

Unlike Elder, Daniels has to build camaraderie in a large organization. "I've seen crew chiefs who aren't necessarily racer-savvy and aren't necessarily great innovators, but they're great team leaders," he says. "You can be a really good leader and understand how personalities, the puzzle pieces [fit]."

No relationship in racing is more important than the one between driver and crew chief. Before teaming with Larson, Daniels was Johnson's crew chief for a season and a half. The two meshed well right away, building on their existing relationship and bonding over their passion for bicycling. Johnson could easily communicate what he thought the car needed. "There was no language barrier," says Daniels.

When Daniels took over Larson's team in 2021, the situation was different. Larson was new to Hendrick, and Daniels knew him only from afar. "I certainly had to become a student of Kyle," says Daniels—studies that were hampered by the COVID-19 protocols that limited their time together at the track. While Johnson would tell Daniels what the car was doing, Larson spoke more in terms of what he thought he could do to drive it better. Eventually the two figured each other out and won 10 races in their first season together and another three last year. The future looks rosy. Who knows what size diamonds await them. —M.B.

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football season.

"Everyone always asks if they have personalities, and they definitely do," Sweeney says. "They don't love you like a dog or a cat; they don't form that kind of bond. For raptors it's about trust and positive reinforcement."

That means food, which—along with lots of practice—is a key to training the seven-pound birds. The trainers go through about 150 pounds of a mix of frozen mice, rats, chicks and quail annually.

The center takes in about 300 raptors per year. Those that can't be released into the wild become "permanent ambassadors"—which might mean visiting schools or flying in front of 87,000 football fans. "When practicing, we don't pump in any artificial noise," Hopkins says. "I always joke, 'If you think Jordan Hare Stadium is loud, try going to a preschool when you bring out an eagle.' It's got about the same volume." *—Sarah Vasile*

Major League Mascot

NAME: ROSIE RED (AKA AMY BURGESS)

EMPLOYER: CINCINNATI REDS

MOST MASCOTS ARE shrouded in secrecy. And fur. Secrecy and fur.

Rosie Red is an exception. It's no secret who brings Cincinnati's mascot to life: Amy Burgess, who created the character 15 years ago.

According to the Reds' website, Rosie attended the College for High Energy and Entertainment Routines (CHEER). Burgess, on the other hand, graduated from Miami (Ohio) with a BFA in theater performance. "I know there are a lot of folks out there who aspire to be professional mascots, and they start when they're in high school. And they work their way through college sports and then up to the majors," says Burgess. "I was going to go be an actor. That was my trajectory in life."

After school Burgess landed an internship with a local theater and soon was looking for a side hustle. She found it as a member of the Reds' in-game promotional team, the crew that does things like fire T-shirt cannons. Her boss played Gapper, one of the team's mascots. When he needed a backup, he let Burgess wear the suit. Before long the team decided to add a female mascot to a stable that also includes Mr. Red and Mr. Redlegs, and Burgess was asked to develop the character.

Even when she's inside the costume, Burgess puts her theater training to use. "I tend to be pretty actively emoting in the suit, even though I know no one can see it," she says. "I think there is something to be said for body language and intention behind movements. Even if people can't see your face, your intentions are gonna read through what you're doing." It works; her coworkers swear that they can tell when Burgess is glaring at them. "They're like, 'Oh, Amy's staring at us,' " she says. "I'm still smiling. Rosie is still looking at them like normal. But they know if I'm like, *Cut it out*."

Burgess had little trouble transitioning into the role of Rosie, thanks to her experience playing Gapper as well as Mr. Red and Mr. Redlegs. As she puts it, "I was used to ball-headed figures by that point."

Still, one's world changes drastically when one has a giant baseball over one's head. "I do think that kinesthetic awareness is heightened [in the suit]," she says. "So what I lack in peripheral vision, I tend to pick up in other ways. My hearing becomes heightened, or my spatial awareness around me is heightened. I have a much stronger sense of where steps are going to be, or if I have to duck or not. *Oh, that chandelier's a little low*."

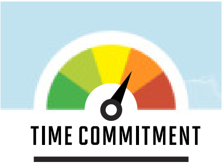
One thing Burgess can't rely on is speech. She wants the kids who interact with her to imagine Rosie however they want and not to think about how there's a person inside. "I don't talk as the character. Ever," she says. "I don't want that to go away for them."

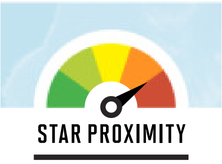
That's not to say she can't form relationships—which is, according to Burgess, the highlight of the job. She has her regulars, kids who come looking for her as soon as they enter the Great American Ballpark. "I know that sounds weird because it's one-sided," she says, "but it doesn't feel one-sided."

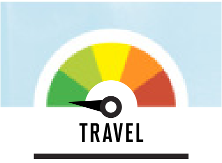
One of her regulars has cerebral palsy. "She got a new wheelchair and all she wanted to do was come show it to me. Her mom was like, 'She didn't wanna do anything until she showed you her new wheelchair.' It feels like you're on a journey with these kids even though you're a character and they don't know who you really are." (In fact, people who don't know that Rosie is played by Burgess tend to make a big assumption. "Everyone thinks I'm a dude," she says.)

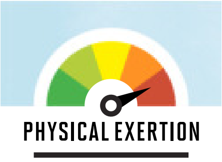
Of course, the job has its occasional downsides. Overly touchy kids. Drunk fans. Lint-roller budgets. Static electricity. Not just anyone can relate to mascot problems, though, so Rosie and her furry big league brethren have set up a private Facebook page where they can compare notes.

It's a time-consuming job. In addition to all 81 home games, Rosie makes about 250 outside appearances a year. Things get especially hectic around Halloween. ("Everyone's like, 'You already have a costume,' " Burgess says.)









Her work as Rosie is all of the acting Burgess does these days. But she still has time to run a theater company for high school kids. She and her husband, Jason, direct 120 aspiring actors from 25 schools and put on two shows a year. She's not actively trying to groom the next Rosie, but Burgess hopes that her 15 years in the suit—being the belle of the ballhead, if you will—can open doors and inspire a future, diverse generation of baseball workers, fuzzy or otherwise.

"I want people, especially girls and young women, to know that there is an opportunity to work in professional sports, especially baseball, which seems like is a guys' sport," Burgess says. "There's really an outlet for a whole lot of female participation. It's good for especially younger girls to be able to see that there are ways to work in sports that don't require playing for a team. You can still contribute in a valuable way and affect the experiences of the people who come to the game." —M.B.

Front Office Exec

NAME: *MORGAN CATO*

EMPLOYER: *PHOENIX SUNS*

GROWING UP, DESPITE loving basketball, Morgan Cato's dream was not to be an NBA executive. "I used to want to be a scientist," says Cato. "I'm dating myself, but I used to want to be Indiana Jones. I think it was a combination of the curiosity, travel and really being involved with life. I was always a curious kid."

While no one is confusing a cellphone and a trade machine with a bullwhip and a fedora, Cato does tick some of the Indy boxes in her current role as assistant general manager and vice president of basketball operations for the Suns. She travels with the team all over the country. Her curious nature allows her to operate various aspects of the Phoenix basketball apparatus. And she's incredibly involved with the players on the roster.

"In my role, I get to play wide across the majority of our basketball matters," Cato explains. "I spend quite a bit of time in coaching and player development. I work on our off-court brand strategy. I have connectivity with our business side and how they engage with our guys. And then I deal with all of our player matters and team rules."

Cato's role, she says, is not necessarily to find the next great player. Her job largely focuses on how she can bring out the best of the people currently in the building. That means creating specific player enhancement plans so they can grow over the regular season and working with coach Monty Williams and general manager James Jones to help get the most out of everyone on the roster.

The unique job Cato occupies is a reflection of her singular path to the Suns' front office. She wanted to study sports management at Stony Brook, but her father advised her to take a business track instead. While Cato was first upset that her father seemingly didn't want her to follow her dreams, she now sees how valuable her education—a bachelor's degree in business management and a master's in human resource management—have set her up for success.

"Understanding the foundation of how organizations and businesses function allows you to figure out how to refine your product," Cato says. "Our product happens to be people—highly talented, unique individuals. My father wanted me to go deep on *why?* and then learn how to apply that to anything you do in life."

As a massive basketball fan growing up in New York City, Cato still wanted to stay in touch with the sport in college. She worked with athletes and on "anything campus recreation" while in school and started to realize she had a talent for connecting with people. After graduating, even with a master's, she was distraught when she had only one, low-paying job offer from a nonprofit. But Cato's ability to form relationships enabled her to bounce around industries, from an HR manager to a recruiter for both Lehman Brothers and Ernst & Young.

She was at Ernst & Young in 2013 when she considered quitting and heading to law school because she missed hoops and thought about becoming an agent. That's when she got a call from a friend at the NBA. "Someone that I had been

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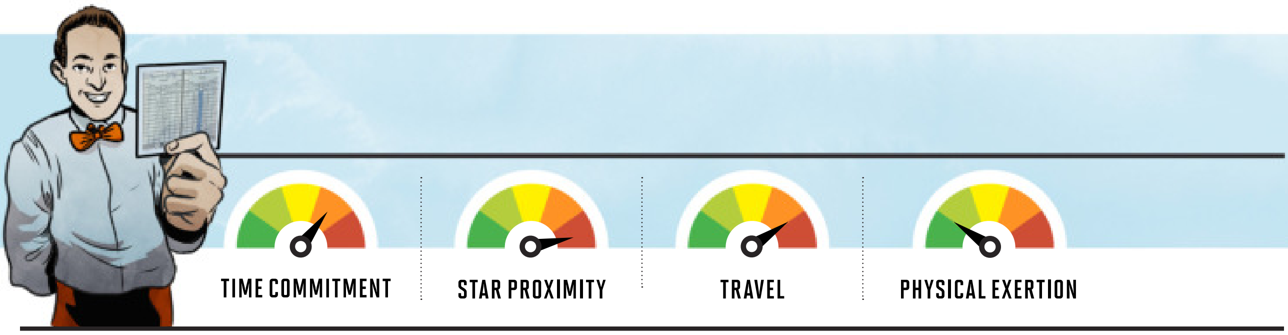
consistently talking with about my interest, my desire for sports, and how I want to contribute, when he was working at the NBA, he said, ‘Mo, I have the perfect job for you,’ ” Cato recalls. “It’s also a bit about the persistence.”

After more than nine years at the NBA, Cato was hired by the Suns last July, making her the first woman of color to hold the title of assistant GM. In her last couple of years with the league, Cato had moved over to the business operations side, which enabled her to form relationships with people in front offices across the NBA. Her advice to those trying to emulate a similar career path is to think about why they want to be a general manager. Cato says too many people focus on the transactional aspects of running a team as opposed to how they can best make meaningful contributions. “The model and template for GM is changing daily,” she says. “If anything, being a GM now is about talent management. How are you doing your best to develop guys in a short period of time? It’s beyond just contracts and salary negotiations.”

Cato takes great pride in forming genuine bonds with the players on the team. (She says her secret is treating them like human beings.) And as far as being a trailblazer, it moves Cato to know she’s opening up more pathways for people like herself. “When I got the job, I didn’t think it would have mattered that much,” she says. “For the next the two and a half months, I cried with humility. I hope that for those who tend not to look at others, they widen their scope to look for talent. And I hope that you don’t wait for the news to pay attention. People who are in decision-making roles, I hope they play a bit more wide in how they want to grow their teams and who they want to be on their side when they make those decisions.” *—Rohan Nadkarni*



Boxing Judge

NAME: STEVE WEISFELD

EMPLOYER: VARIOUS AGENCIES

STEVE WEISFELD can trace his interest in boxing judging to a 1976 bout between George Foreman and Ron Lyle. A 10-year-old Weisfeld wondered how it was being scored. “I remember wanting the right guy to win,” says Weisfeld. “And I was hooked.”

There is no national commission for boxing judges; each state has its own criteria. To get licensed in New Jersey, Wesfield judged amateur bouts for five years and went through a one-year apprentice program that required him to attend every fight in the state.

Today he is licensed in roughly half the country. (A judge licensed in a reputable state like New Jersey or Nevada is often licensed by other commissions without any extra training needed.) He works 25 to 30 shows per year. He flies in on Friday. He has a card on Saturday—a judge doesn’t know which fights he is officiating until the day of—and flies out on Sunday. It isn’t especially lucrative (anywhere from a few hundred dollars for club shows up to a few thousand). But Weisfeld, who is a full-time real estate attorney, has been ringside for some epic bouts, such Manny Pacquiao vs. Juan Manuel Marquez.

The Association of Boxing Commissions offers “General Rules” for judging. But they are more about preparation (“Eat light at least four to five hours before”) than actually scoring a fight. Weisfeld tries to keep it simple. He looks for who lands the most effective punches and who controlled the round.

A bad decision can marr a fighter’s career, and that’s not lost on Weisfeld. Judging, he says, “is a tremendous responsibility.” *—Chris Mannix*

CONFESSIONS OF A TEENAGE BALL BOY

Ball Boy

NAME: CHRIS MANNIX

[FORMER] EMPLOYER: BOSTON CELTICS

IT'S BEEN NEARLY 30 years since my father was asked the question, at a wedding he doesn't really remember, from a guest he didn't really know: *Does your son like basketball?* His tablemate that day—a fellow police officer, my father recalls—had some connections in the Celtics organization. If I—a skinny teenager with Coke-bottle glasses—wanted to work as a ball boy, he could get me the gig.

And so in 1995, the year the TD Garden (then called the Fleet Center) opened, I became a mop-pushing, rebound-collecting member of the Celtics' staff. The pay was $25 per game. The stories were worth more.

In my second year I was rebounding before a game against Chicago on the Bulls' end of the floor. Michael Jordan was among the shooters. I wore a Duke T-shirt that day—I dreamed of being the next Bobby Hurley—which Jordan, as he headed walked past me, noticed. "Duke sucks," he said.

"You suck," I retorted, instinctively. Bemused, Jordan motioned me over and proceeded to knock down a dozen turnaround jumpers over me. Someone snapped a photo, which sits on my desk to this day.

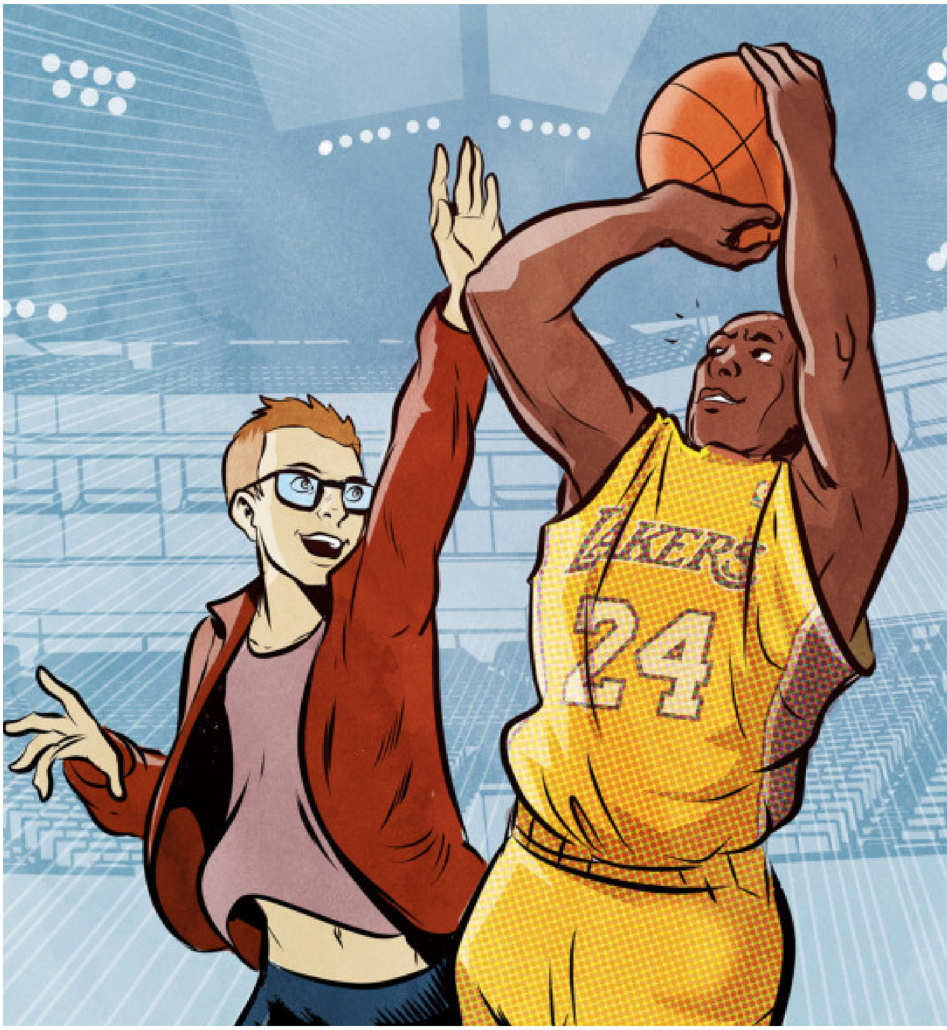
I've got a lot of those pictures. Kobe Bryant. Tracy McGrady. Ray Allen, a creature of habit, who made firing jumpers over me part of his pregame routine whenever he came to town. When I wasn't rebounding or mopping up sweat, I was a gofer. Food, gear, whatever. In my first season guard David Wesley asked me to grab a pair of sneakers out of his car. Rushing out of the locker room, I barreled straight into Larry Bird, who was just a few years into retirement. He asked where I was going. "David Wesley needs his sneakers," I told him.

"Tell David Wesley," Bird said, "to get his own f---ing sneakers."

When I told Wesley what had happened, his eyes widened: "Larry said that?" I don't know who got Wesley's sneakers that day. But it wasn't me.

As I got older, I started to realize where the money was. Visiting locker room attendants—what you called yourself when you realized college women weren't impressed with "ball boy"—were paid in cash, $50 to $100 per game from the team, plus whatever tips they squeezed out of players.

I made mental notes of player preferences. John Amaechi liked Earl Grey tea in his locker. Darrell Armstrong drank several cups of coffee before every game. Linger around Reggie Miller and Mark Jackson after games and you'd get $100 to bring a couple of small bags to the bus.



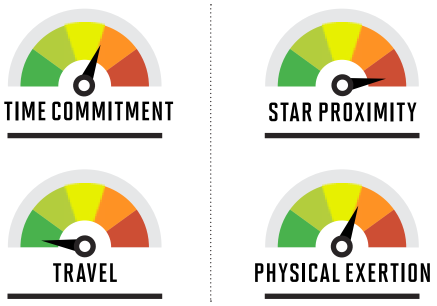
In 2001, Chicago's Charles Oakley sent me on a McDonald's run, with instructions to leave the bag on a specific seat on the bus. When I boarded, I walked past Jerry Krause, the Bulls' general manager. An irritated Krause told me to take the food away. Walking back to the locker room, I saw Oakley. I explained what had happened. Grabbing the bag, Oakley opened up a folding chair a few feet from the bus. With Krause watching from the window, Oakley chowed down.

In 2002, Boston played Philadelphia in the first round of the playoffs. Before the series-deciding Game 5, Allen Iverson handed me a wad of cash with orders to buy as many Coronas as I could (plus a couple of bottles of whiskey). Late in the fourth quarter, I pushed a hand truck to the nearest liquor store. As I brought it back, a few giddy Celtics fans ripped cases off of it. Back in the building, Boston players grabbed a few more. By the time I got to the Sixers' bus, only a few of the cases remained. "That's all you got?" Iverson asked me. He didn't care. He grabbed one of the bottles and boarded.

There's more. So many more. Dale Davis betting several of us $1,000 each that we couldn't take him in a fight. (No one took him up on it.) Getting doused with beer by Richard Jefferson after the Nets beat the Celtics in the conference finals. Darting out of the way when Milwaukee teammates Glenn Robinson and Ervin Johnson charged toward each other after a difficult loss.

I had eyes on sportswriting back then, so I leaked a few things. I found SPORTS ILLUSTRATED'S Ian Thomsen when I saw Larry Brown congratulating Iverson on his USA Basketball selection. I tipped *The Boston Globe*'s Michael Smith after Rafer Alston and Jerry Stackhouse got into it.

In the fall of 2003, I landed a job with SI as a fact-checker. My last game as a ball boy was an exhibition against Washington. Jordan was there, in his final season with the Wizards. I remember standing by his locker and thinking I'd probably never get this kind of access to him—or anyone—again. —C.M.



Poker Dealer

NAME: *EMILY DELAINE*

EMPLOYER: *VARIOUS*

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■ **THERE ARE FEW** more universal truths in the world than "Grad school doesn't pay well." That's how Emily DeLaine describes why she got into dealing cards. She had just started work on her Ph.D. in sociology at Oregon and realized she was going to need some cash. At a poker room, the manager asked her whether she was interested in dealing, so she said sure.

"I might be unique in that I had no idea how to deal poker," says DeLaine. "It was a pretty steep learning curve." She trained for about a month at the poker room, practicing the art of shuffling, pitching cards to players and keeping track of bets. "I would practice, practice, practice," says DeLaine. "The thing about dealing poker is once you get the mechanics down, it becomes muscle memory. And the more things you can commit to muscle memory, the more you can focus on running a good, clean, fair game."

DeLaine worked her first World Series of Poker in 2015. For the sport's biggest event, Caesars hires up to 1,400 dealers, all of whom must have a gaming certificate and six months' experience and pass a background check.

A dealer's pay varies (the WSOP pays $12.50 an hour plus potentially substantial bonuses), and DeLaine sets her own schedule. She had a baby in 2019 and travels less now, but she still works tournaments and cruises. She's dealt final tables at the WSOP and has also flung cards to celebs such as Bill Clinton. But there's another bonus to the job. "I know so many dealers who now are professional poker players, and that's pretty cool," says DeLaine, who rarely plays herself. "You're learning how to play poker on scholarship." —M.B.

POINT AFTER

BOLD AND BEAUTIFUL

REMEMBERING TWO SOCCER TITANS

BY STEPHEN CANNELLA

SOCCER, THE BEAUTIFUL GAME: It may be a cliché, but the final weeks of 2022 brought poignant reminders of why the cliché came to be. Soccer is beautiful when played at peak levels of skill and artistry, as it was in the epic World Cup final in Qatar. Lionel Messi of Argentina scored two goals and, after 120 breathtaking minutes, converted a penalty kick in the shootout that decided the game and gave Messi his first World Cup trophy. Kylian Mbappé, who's on the World's Best Player short list along with Messi, did all he could to help France repeat as champion, with three goals and a PK shootout tally of his own. It was, many said, the greatest World Cup final ever played.

But soccer is also beautiful for the people and personalities who shape its story, a point brought into sharp relief with the loss of two men who, each in his own way, served as great ambassadors of the sport. Pelé, who died Dec. 29 at 82 after a long illness, was simply the most dazzling star soccer—or any sport—has ever seen. He was an international icon synonymous with and largely responsible for the game's global growth in the second half of the 20th century. It was through him that many Americans were introduced to a sport that had already captivated much of the world.

Pelé's passing followed another loss, one that hit especially close to home for us at SPORTS ILLUSTRATED. On Dec. 9, longtime soccer writer Grant Wahl died at 49 after collapsing from an aortic aneurysm while covering Argentina's World Cup quarterfinal win over the Netherlands. Grant joined SI as a fact-checker in 1996; he went on to write dozens of cover stories, focusing largely on college basketball but soon shifting exclusively to soccer. As he traveled the globe, telling stories with words, podcasts and video for SI for 24 years and more recently on his own, Grant combined his adoration for the sport—crucially, the women's game as well as the men's—with a true journalist's rigor, voice and devotion to truth and accountability. He deepened our understanding and appreciation of a sport that, as Pelé's celebrity foreshadowed and as Grant often predicted would happen, has finally gone mainstream for U.S. audiences. A beautiful legacy, indeed. □

PITCH PERFECTION

The soccer journeys of Wahl (above) and Pelé (left, with the New York Cosmos in 1975) crossed paths during an interview in 2004 (far left).

DAMIAN STROHMEYER (WAHL); GARY BOGDON (WAHL AND PELE); NEIL LEIFER (PELE)

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